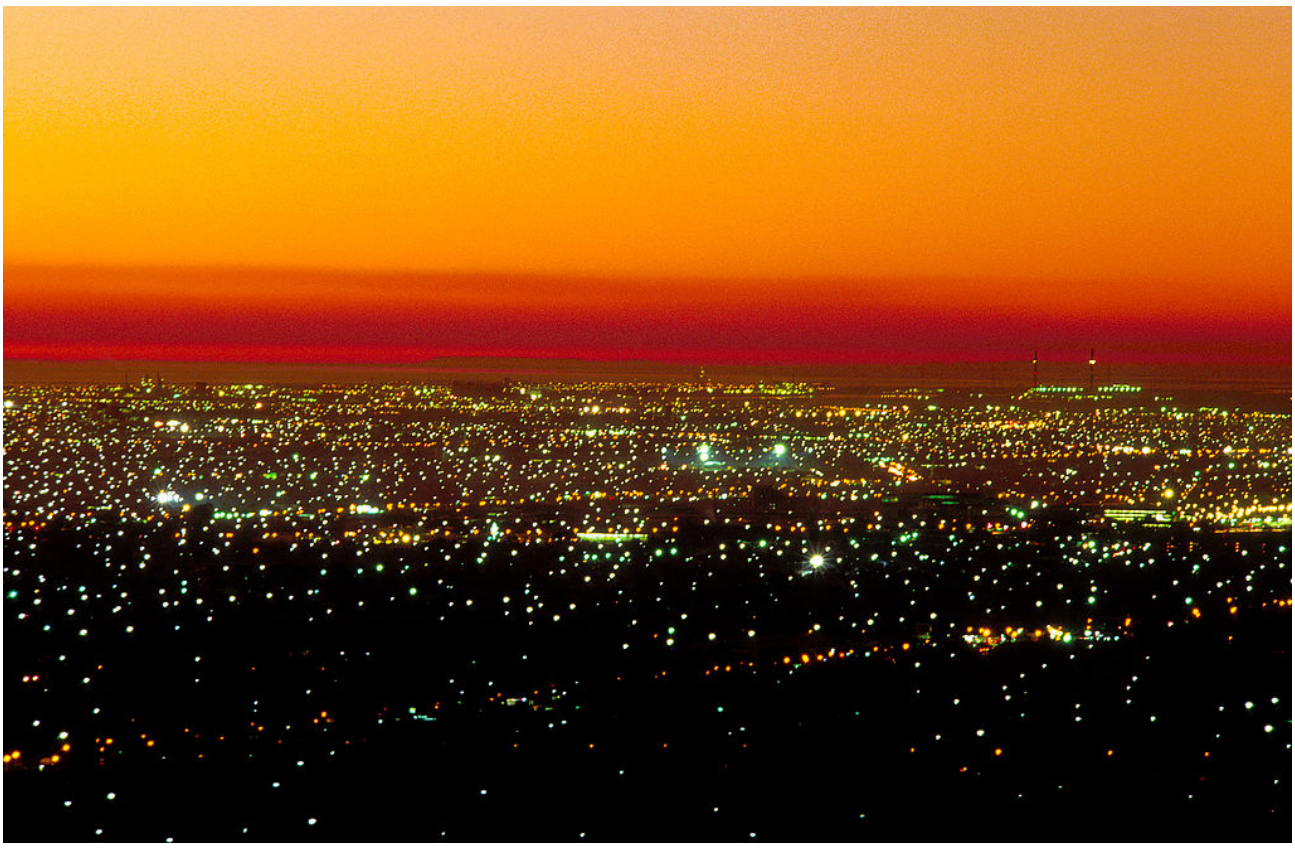
Serious Issues for Young Readers

by Anita Heiss



He was a warrior at heart, that Jali boy. But unlike the stories of his ancestors, his story was one of struggling to find out who he was, in a world he wasn't sure of yet.
(Macourt 22)

Written for *The BlackWords Essays*.

(Click the link to return to the *Essays* Table of Contents)

Author's Note - 2019

Since the publication of this essay back in 2015, Oxford University Press followed up their *Yarning Strong* series for upper primary (Years 5-6), with another series of books for lower primary students (Years 3-4). The second series focusses on the three core themes of Family, Identity and Land.

Young adult titles published in recent years considered coming of age, identity, sexuality, the environment, what else have also been published in recent years by Jared Thomas, Jane Harrison (*Becoming Kirrali Lewis*), Sue McPherson (*Brontide).*

In 2015, Leah Purcell, Greg Waters and Adrian Wills and also wrote the film *Ready for This* about six teenagers pursuing their dreams while dealing with the challenges of growing up.

Introduction

This paper explores some texts written for young or inexperienced readers. It introduces some useful texts that can be used in teaching or in literacy acquisition. The works discussed here can also be used to share ideas about and discuss matters relating to Indigenous identity in the context of self-identification, self-esteem, and cultural belonging. Students and young people from all cultural backgrounds will be able to relate to the experiences of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander characters in the stories.

Compared to the number of published Indigenous-authored children's picture books and adult fiction, there remains a gap in the young adult market. With the introduction of the national Australian Curriculum in 2014, and the requirement that Indigenous Studies is embedded in the classroom, it is timely that dozens of new books are now being published for upper-primary and young adult readers. There are increasing numbers of titles addressing issues of identity, self-esteem, relationships, and peer-group pressure available for both educators and students.

Readers in upper-primary are for the first time reading urban-based stories of contemporary Indigenous Australia, written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors. For example, the *Yarning Strong* series was published by Oxford University Press in conjunction with Laguna Bay Publishing from 2011. This series, which published twenty authors plus accompanying illustrators for graphic novels, includes four modules: Identity, Family, Law, and Land. Each module includes one anthology, three fiction books, and one graphic novel.

This literacy project was designed for the primary school market; however, it is also being used with students who have low literacy skills or who are reluctant readers. The number of stories with male characters also serves to encourage greater reading participation by boys.

Young Readers and Identity

The four books in the *Yarning Strong Identity Series* module of *Yarning Strong* include Fiona Wirrer-George Oochunyung's *Jindah Murray Wind Dancer*; Bruce Pascoe's *The Chainsaw File*; Gayle Kennedy's *Just the Skin You're Livin' In*,

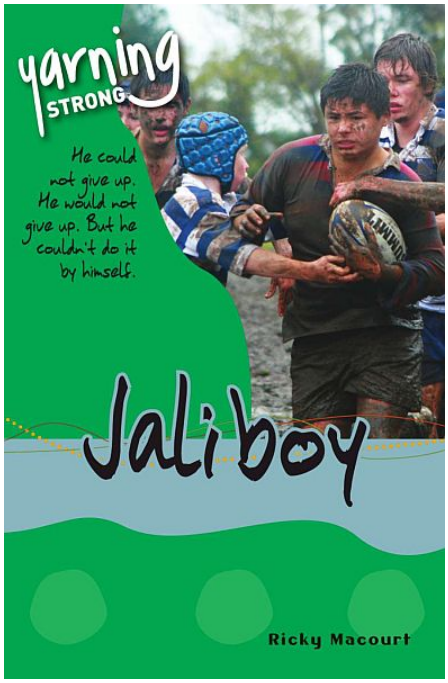
illustrated by Ross Carnsew; and Ricky Macourt's *Jali Boy* (all Laguna Bay Publishing/ OUP, 2011).

Gumbaingirr man, Ricky Macourt's novel focuses on Jali Williams, a loyal, strong spirited kid, who loves his family and wants to be there for his younger brother Kain. But like many teenagers, Jali is misunderstood by his teachers and his peers and while he thinks about staying out of trouble he knows it's not '*hard for an Aboriginal boy to find himself in a whole world of trouble. That was how the world saw them, Aboriginal boys making trouble. That was how the world worked.*' (9).

While managing her leukaemia, Jali's mother Marlikka is raising her sons alone. But Jali blames himself for his father leaving, and while feeling a sense of abandonment and sadness, is also forced to be a role model for his younger brother and show the appropriate respect for Country, especially along the riverbank near the Brownhill Aboriginal Mission, where they live.

At school, with poor literacy and numeracy skills, and not fitting in with either the white kids or the Indigenous kids, Jali, who is of mixed ancestry, gets into a lot of fights and a lot of trouble. At times he succumbs to the peer pressure of the Mission boys and ends up making some bad choices.

Then, with no choices left – for mother or son – Jali is sent to boarding school in the city in the hope of a brighter, more positive life path. Feeling out of place, still struggling to read and write, and with maths, and a few too many visits to the principal's office, Jali misses home terribly, often losing himself in thoughts of his mother and brother, and the pipis and fish he used to enjoy back home. To Jali's benefit, though, boarding school provides a more supportive schooling environment where teachers take time to explain the consequences of his negative actions, so that he can learn to be the better man he wants to be. Jali also finds a sense of brotherhood with a new mate Jack, who shares similar interests including admiration for rugby league player Jonathan Thurston.



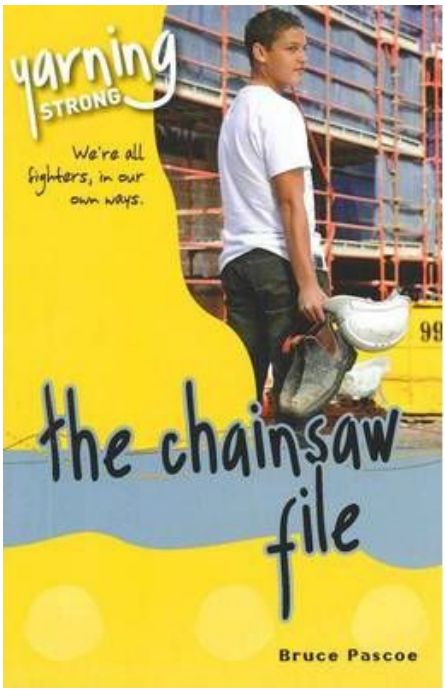
Jali's story also highlights the 'us and them' view of those living on and off the mission, and the division between black and white as well as the imaginary line between both places that was never crossed for the wrong reasons – because of a lack of understanding. It also notes the history, culture, and sense of place Brownhill Aboriginal Mission gave the Gumbaingirr mob who lived there (Macourt 10).

Through Jali's time at boarding school and his reflections about the Mission, we learn about the ongoing cultural traditions passed on to young people today in some regions, the need to respect and listen to Elders, and the joy in shared storytelling.

Jali's journey at St. Stephen's is also a story about reconciliation, true friendship, and the difference a supportive

educational environment can make to a young person. Jali proves that it's possible to make change within oneself when offered positive affirmation rather than punishment and scolding. And while Jali is an Aboriginal kid, his experiences are shared by many young Australian boys, increasing the merit of this story for inclusion in the Australian Curriculum because, in addition to its Indigenous content, it is instructive for students of all cultural backgrounds.

Ricky Macourt went to boarding school himself and admits it was 'really tough leaving my home and family… and feeling like I didn't belong.' He says that all the emotions and experiences uncovered in Jali's story he has experienced himself.



Another story with male characters in the Identity module is *The Chainsaw File* by Bunurong author, Bruce Pascoe, which offers an acute and powerful reminder that '*What other people think doesn't decide who you are.*' (52)

Selective history and racial stereotyping have long been part of the problem with the Australian education system's failure to adequately prepare students with appropriate knowledge and tools for social interaction with Indigenous Australians. However, for Indigenous students in the classroom and in the community, the question becomes which fight to pick and with whom?

Pascoe's *The Chainsaw File* answers these questions through the story of Tyrone Smith, a young lad suspended from school for questioning his teacher Brooksy about Captain Cook 'discovering Australia', only to find a new challenge on the building site his father takes him to as punishment.

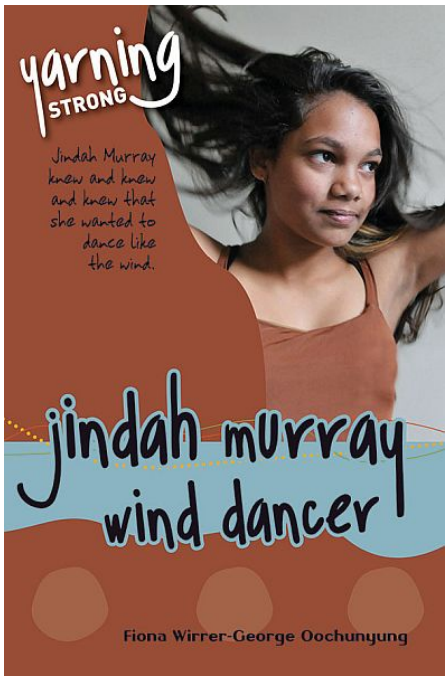
The Chainsaw File opens with a comment about segregation in Australian history and the Freedom Rides led by the late Charlie Perkins, and concludes with some reflections upon the way some people still insist on 'measuring Aboriginality'.

Told through the voice of young Tyrone (known at school as 'Smith the Stirrer'), who appreciates the girls and always compares himself to Easy Thomas: '*Easy was handsome; I had a head like a twisted thong.*' (6) Readers get a glimpse into how different life is between generations of Aboriginal people, often because of the 'privilege' younger people have in terms of access to education and the freedom of thought and speech enjoyed in the late 20th and early 21st century, compared to the lack of the those basic rights back in the 1960s.

The big questions confronting Tyrone, and therefore his family, involve his need to challenge his teacher at school, and then his father about the building site 'lingo' and conversation among co-workers; a racist brickie known as Boxer (known for his bouts and apparently too many punches to the head), talks about 'bush abos' drinking, taking drugs, stealing and beating their women. Boxer quickly amends his rant with a comment to Les, Tyrone's father: '*But you're not like the rest of them.*' (19)

This fast paced, punchy story about the differences between 'knowing' something and 'understanding' it, especially in terms of family history, makes it a valuable novel for use in the classroom, and it comes with a play adaptation in the Identity anthology discussed below.

Identity issues for young Aboriginal girls are covered in the novel *Jindah Murray Wind Dancer*, penned by Wik author, Fiona Wirrer-George Oochunyung, who writes *'Identity is identity, no matter what your background.'* (54)

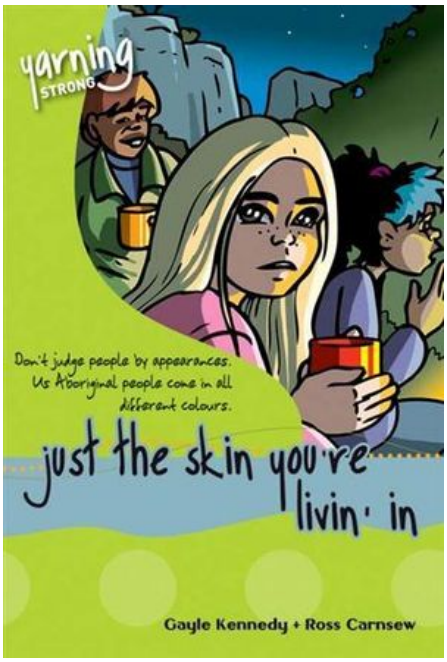


Focusing on expressing Aboriginal identity in the 21st century, the novel weaves the themes of self-discovery, valuing family, and the merits of hard work and determination, into the tale of a teenage life set in Brisbane, and told through the first person voice of the 13-year-old character Jindah.

Jindah likes going to the Murri School, regards the wind as her invisible friend (and later finds out it's her totem), and she really loves to dance. She wants to dance on stage '*like a brolga bird, straight strong back, nice pointy feet, kick my legs high, turn like a spinning top…*' (15) and in her 'dream magic place' her body can do anything. When Jindah gets the chance to dance at school she sets herself a standard – '*to try to be deadly or not at all*.' (30)

Jindah's story includes her single-parent home and the strained relationship between her mum and dad, but fortunately it doesn't impact on her relationship with her father and the lessons he can teach her about her own history and cultural heritage.

Jindah learns in simple terms about aspects of culture like totems and the consequences of a history of Aboriginal people being moved onto missions and reserves where they were denied the right to practice culture, including dance. The reader learns these lessons, as well, while reading about the fusion of traditional and contemporary forms of dance.



Finally, Gayle Kennedy's *Just the Skin You're Livin' In* offers, in graphic novel form, the key themes of knowing who you are, refusing to be defined by others, racism, and the importance of family.

Tahnee is from the Wongaiibon people (like Kennedy herself) and lives with her extended family in western New South Wales, where there's a multicultural school population. She likes doing what other kids do: swimming in the river, going to the footy, riding bikes, camping, and so on.

But her seemingly normal teenage life takes a twist when she heads off to boarding school, where she's the only Koori girl in her school year.

Confronted with racial stereotyping from some of her new friends, who think she's 'too fair' and only pretending to be Aboriginal for financial benefit, or that she must've been 'adopted into an Aboriginal family', Tahnee is distraught when she heads home for school holidays.

While at home with her family though, Tahnee finds comfort and strength in the words of her Nan, who reminds her that: '*Kooris come in all different colours. Ya brother's dark as night but he's still ya brother*' (35). Her Nan instils the message that skin does not define identity by saying '*…your skin is just the thing you're livin' in. It's the wrapping that you came in* .' (35)

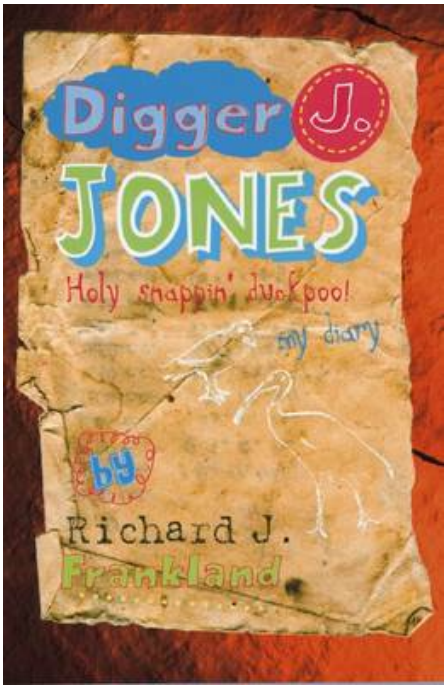
Accompanying the novels is the *Identity Anthology* which adds cultural and educational value to the titles in the module. The foreword is written by Dr Chris Sarra (then Executive Director of the Stronger Smarter Institute and author of the memoir *Good Morning, Mr Sarra*) and shares a positive approach to experiencing and celebrating identity, based on the strength in identity his mother had instilled in him as a child. His message:

> *Being Aboriginal is something to be extremely proud of. How many other kids in your school can say they carry the blood of the very first Australians? How many other kids in your school can say they are the descendants of the oldest known human existence on the planet?*
>
> *Tragically we live in an Australian society that has, throughout history, tried to make us feel inferior and not good about who we are. Even more tragically, there were many of us who actually started to believe that we were inferior, and that our cultural identity meant that we had to be at the bottom of the pile. Somehow we ended up putting each other down because we didn't think it was OK for Aboriginal people to be high achievers. We have a long way to go to overcome this, but importantly we have started the journey.* (5)

In taking up the challenge of teaching 'identity' in the classroom, the *Yarning Strong Identity Anthology* goes a long way to

explaining the various aspects, hallmarks, and symbols of identity that Aboriginal people use to express their identity today. The notes for teachers include the history of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, a definition of Aboriginal English, and examples of Aboriginal languages active today. There's poetry by Fred Penny ('The Urba-rigine'), Charmaine Papertalk-Green ('Identity'), and Yvette Holt ('Primary Education') alongside news reports on racism in sport and responses by some of our most high profile role models like Timana Tahu and Nicky Winmar. Also covered is the importance of respecting one another, the history and meaning of NAIDOC, and an excerpt from Sally Morgan's *My Place*.

One of the most important inclusions in the anthology is former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 'Sorry' speech, of 13 February 2008. Accompanying his words are images by Wayne Quillam, NAIDOC 2009 Artist of the Year and official photographer for the Apology event in Canberra.



Outside the *Yarning Strong* series, there are few other works of fiction for upper primary and secondary students. However, two stories that will engage, educate, and on some levels entertain students, and also fulfil English and History requirements of the Australian Curriculum, include Kilkurt Gilga / Gunditjmara writer Richard Frankland's *Digger J. Jones: Holy snappin' duck poo! My Diary*, (2007) and my own *Who Am I? : The Diary of Mary Talence : Sydney, 1937*, Sydney 1937, (2001) both published by Scholastic.

Frankland is known to most as a staunch Aboriginal activist, a singer and songwriter, the writer and director of the film *Harry's War* (1999), and for his monumental role in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. But he is also a novelist who writes for children.

His first book *Digger J. Jones* is written in diary format, set in 1967, and marks the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, which altered two sections of the Constitution – allowing Aboriginal people to be counted on the census as citizens and reverting legislative powers relating to Aboriginal people to the Commonwealth.

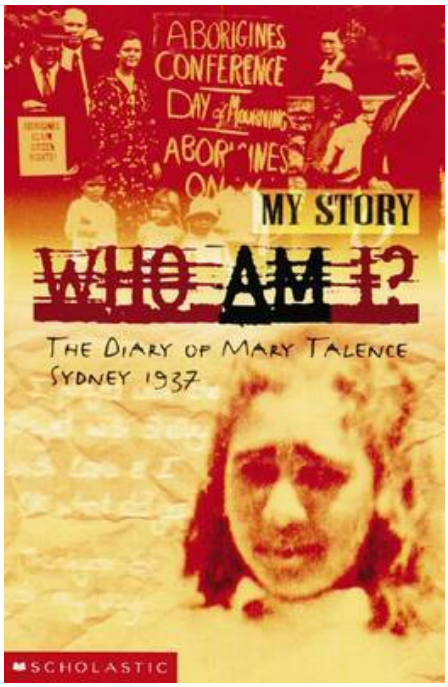
Digger J. Jones, the central character and narrator, gives Australia a new favourite son. He's a feisty and cheeky ten year old who loves raspberries and chips, and lives in Melbourne with his Mum, Dad, and brother Paulie who, very early in the story, dies in the Vietnam War. The sadness around Paulie's death, and the struggle for Digger to understand the marches and discussions taking place around him in the lead up to the Referendum, is offset by the narrator's hilarious phraseology, as Digger starts to read the bible and is confused about the word begat and who's begetting who and why. Students will laugh at the episodes of Digger and Darcy-the-Dick - his once arch-rival now best mate - kissing girls behind the shed, something he calls 'fishlicking'. There are also funny scenes about the boys poonching (farting).

The innocence of Digger falling in love with marble-playing nun Sister Ally is beautiful, and he then tries to convert his

mate Stevie to the Church in an attempt to win Sister Ally's heart. Digger is shattered when he learns that his admired one is married to Jesus. Stevie's dog is actually called Dog, but also answers to the name Jesus, which makes for some interesting scenes in Mass when the priest says 'Jesus' and the dog takes to the altar. There is no disrespect to the Church intended just the reality of the innocence of youth and the occasional naughtiness of young boys.

Digger J. Jones is an important book for young boys; it's a story that deals with male relationships, how males grieve, how young men deal with anger and, indeed, how they deal with girls!

For the same age group but with a female protagonist, *Who Am I? : The Diary of Mary Talence : Sydney, 1937* (2001), is an historical novel about the Stolen Generations. The story follows the emotional, psychological, and physical journey of one girl removed from her family under the Act of Protection in New South Wales, and taken to Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home before being fostered by an Irish-Catholic family on Sydney's North Shore. Through that journey readers see the destructive impacts of the assimilation policy and how government policies attempted – and often achieved – the disconnection of Aboriginal people from their true identities.



Mary's character demonstrates the confusion around identity for young children forcibly removed under the Act and raised with white families:

> *I said I wasn't an Aborigine cos I felt ashamed. She said I must be a part-Aborigine cos I looked like one. That made me feel better cos she made out it was all right to be Aboriginal. I'm not goin' to start saying 'I'm a part-Aborigine' though, cos most people seem to think it's a bad thing here in the Hives . . .* (35)
>
> *Well I asked Ma B about talkin' to Dot and she got really angry with me again and got Pa B. He said the same thing. I was not allowed to talk to any Aborigines, and I was supposed to try and be more white, like Sophie and Sam, cos good people were white and bad people were the others. They didn't tell me what they meant by the good and bad people though. I don't want to be a bad person, but I look in the mirror and I don't really look white. All my real brothers and sisters are brown too, and so are my real parents, so how can I be white? And what about Dot? Is she trying to be white too? She can't though, cos she's real dark.* (64-65)

Although Mary is fictional, her journey represents the experiences of thousands of Aboriginal children, as documented in numerous publications, particularly the government inquiry *Bringing Them Home: The 'Stolen Children' Report* (1997). The Bringing Them Home report included submissions from 777 people and organisations and detailed painful evidence of the forcible removal of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The original inquiry that led to the report included Recommendation No. 7 (a): that a National Sorry Day be held each year on 26 May 'to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects'. As a result, each year events are held nationally as a mark of

respect and remembrance.

Stories for Secondary Students

Compared to resources for lower primary students, there are few novels to engage secondary students in reading about the diversity of Indigenous Australian experience. Themes of identity resonate throughout young adult as well as other Indigenous-authored literature, which in general aims to simplify the often complex subject area of identity. Melissa Lucashenko Bundjalung / Yugambeh) cornered the young adult, or YA, market in the late 1990s and early 2000s with her novels *Killing Darcy* (UQP, 1998), set in northern New South Wales and targeting a young male readership, and *Too Flash*, set in Brisbane and directed primarily at a teenage girl readership.

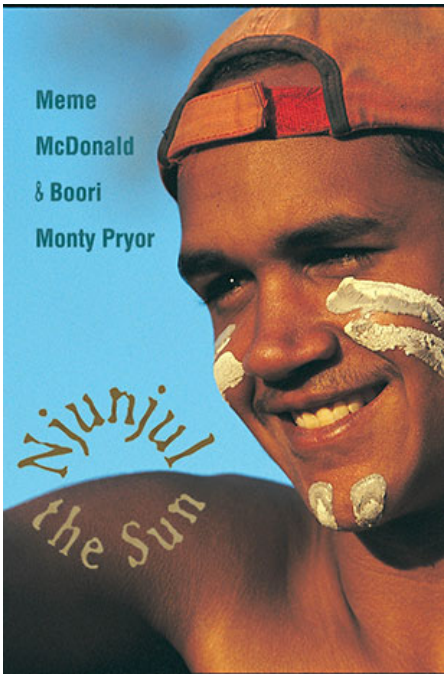
Too Flash (Jukurrpa Books, 2002) focuses on many aspects of self-image and the significance of belonging - to groups of friends, to family, to a culture, to a place. It deals with the complexities of race relations (black and white as well as black on black), as the novel centres on the teen experiences of 15-year-old Zo Stray, who dreams of being a rock star but constantly punishes herself for being 'too fat'.

Zo is close to her one male friend Sione Fafita while living in Dunstan but is uprooted by her 41 year old mother Anna, who's a workaholic. Zo immediately finds herself unhappy in the suburbs of Brisbane and her new school at Maroonga. She is quickly befriended by a local Murri Missy White (who is fair in skin but strong in identity), her six year old sister Kiara, and her cousin, dope-smoking, baby-faced Trey, who's 12 years old and mostly wags school.

Zo's issues of identity as a Blackfella, and divisive attitudes towards Aboriginal identity more generally, are prevalent throughout the book. Too Flash discusses the black on black racism of terms like 'coconuts' and 'flash blacks', which are used between Zo and Missy. Zo is considered privileged because she lives in a two bedroom apartment with new, clean whitegoods and cupboards and a fridge full of food, while Missy's home environment is cluttered, cramped, and without any of the commodities many take for granted.

Apart from the psychological journey of being Black and being 'Black enough', Zo struggles with the common teenage girl issues of self-image and weight control, a health issue that does not confine itself to a particular class, age or cultural background. Zo regards herself as 'the fattest girl in Queensland', and is always conscious of her weight, which she blames for not being able to do important things, like become a singer, or have a boy interested in her.

The girls come to grips with their own realities, however, when as punishment they attend a Kulcha Camp with Aunties Marnie and Barb, and teacher Ms Levy. The camp provides the girls with enough time to get into and then out of conflict with each other, and to learn and then demonstrate respect for each other and their elders. To Zo's pleasure she loses five kilograms in the process, while becoming more aware of her own identity as an urban Murri, and that "*Culture's on the inside of you, not on the outside*". (179)



For the same age group (14-16 years), *Njunjul the Sun* Allen and Unwin, 2002) by Meme McDonald and Boori Pryor (Kungganji and Birrigubba) is a story about the coming of age of one young Aboriginal fella, Njunjul, who leaves behind his immediate family in Happy Valley (which he thinks should be called Un-Happy Valley, given that everyone there is always sad) and heads to Sydney. Once there, his aunt and uncle, an attractive uni student upstairs, and some interesting men on the basketball court, help him unravel the teenage demons many young Aboriginal blokes deal with today.

In following Njunjul's journey readers will share teenage angst, self-esteem issues, self-reflection, and questions of self-worth. But this is not a sad or depressing journey, rather it's a story told with the trademark humour Boori Pryor is known for in his performances. There are some hilarious vignettes throughout, including the story of how the emu got its name, and how Njunjul watches his uncle stretching on the side of the basketball court and thinks to himself, '*I never stretched in my life. Only thing I ever stretched was the truth when I got in trouble.*' (53).

Njunjul avoids a lot of trouble because, while he's analysing his own life and those around him, he is also thinking about the things that are important to him; football and checking out the chicky-babes, including Rhonda, his neighbour.

Life in Sydney is worlds away from tropical Queensland though. In the city, his Aunty Em teaches at a multicultural school and is nicknamed 'Rush Hour' because she rushes everywhere, and his Uncle Garth drives a powder-blue Merc. It's while living with them that he finds a sense of personal happiness, a sense of place, and solidarity on the basketball courts, where he hangs with his Uncle and colourful characters such as Leaping Leeroy, Ritchie Rich, the Boss (who looks like Bruce Springsteen), the Sultan of Swat and the Guru.

Having already made a decision about drugs and alcohol at the age of eight, peer-group pressure once in the big smoke is handled well. When the lads pass njarndi (marijuana) in his direction, the young narrator declines in a calm, non-judgemental way. And while he is accused of considering himself to be better than the others, it's a socially skilful example of how to handle such situations for young men who don't want to go down that self-destructive path.

Identity is an underlying theme throughout the novel and Njunjul makes it known that even though he moves to Sydney, he's still a Murri, not a Koori. Identity doesn't shift, just because the physical body does.

Questions about identity challenge Njunjul also. He says, 'Up home I get busted up by whitefellas for being black. Down here I get busted up by blackfellas 'cause they think I'm trying to be white. I'm wondering what the hell is me.' (88).

When Rhonda suggests that they are both outcasts, it leaves him to ponder:

> *Outcast? I'm trying to think how that sits with those migloo fullas always wanting to call you half-caste, quarter-caste … telling you how to measure what's in your blood. Maybe 'outcast' is like worse. Next to no-caste. Gone see-through or something.* (101)

Njunjul's identity as a blackfella also means he is burdened with often unrealistic expectations, through a barrage of questions:

> *'Are you a traditional Aboriginal?'*
> *'Have you been initiated?'*
> *… They ask me what the drawings on the didgeridoo are. What the gecko means to my people? Is it my totem?*
>
> *Things I don't know, I keep telling them are sacred so I can get some space to think. Same time, I'm laughing up. My Aunty Lillian, she paints real good. She painted this stick, this yikki-yikki of Uncle's. Beautiful geckos all over it. Truth is, she hates geckos. Curses them doing goona all over nice, clean bathroom.* (146)

Njunjul the Sun is a contemporary, urban story that shows how one young Murri fella struggles to find his inner warrior, while showing respect for his elders, love for his family, and exploring his own culture as a form of medicine. It's no wonder then the novel won the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards in the Kraft Foods Prize for Young Adult Fiction in 2002.

Conclusion

All the works listed above feature characters, settings, themes, and issues relevant to young Indigenous Australians today, but aspect of these works also reflect the experiences of many other young Australians and are worthy of inclusion in the Australian Curriculum. The creative works discussed, therefore, while having specific benefits in transmitting necessary cultural information to educate Indigenous students, will also engage non-Indigenous students and other readers with a sense of sameness in terms of coming of age, challenges facing friendships, and the normal growing pains that all teenagers (and their parents) face.

Bibliography

Frankland, Richard. *Digger J. Jones*. Lindfield: Scholastic, 2007. Print.

Heiss, Anita. *Who Am I? : The Diary of Mary Talence : Sydney, 1937*. Lindfield: Scholastic, 2003. Print.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. 'Bringing Them Home: The "Stolen Children" Report'. 1997. Web. http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-appendix-9- recommendations. 26 Sep. 2013.

Kennedy, Gayle. *Just the Skin You're Livin' In*. South Melbourne: OUP, 2011. Print.

Lucashenko, Melissa. *Killing Darcy*. St Lucia: UQP, 1998.

---. *Too Flash*. Alice Springs: Jukurrpa, 2002. Print.

Macourt, Ricky. *Jali Boy*. South Melbourne: OUP, 2011. Print.

McDonald, Meme and Boori Monty Pryor. *Njunjul the Sun*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2002. Print.

Pascoe, Bruce. *The Chainsaw File*. South Melbourne: OUP, 2011. Print.

Sarra, Chris. 'Foreword'. Yarning Strong Identity Anthology. Southern Melbourne: OUP, 2011. Print.

---. *Good Morning, Mr Sarra : My Life Working for a Stronger, Smarter Future for Our Children*. St Lucia: UQP, 2012. Print.

Wirrer-George Oochunyung, Fiona. *Jindah Murray Wind Dancer*. South Melbourne: OUP, 2011. Print.

Image Credits

Head banner. CSIRO ScienceImage 4250 Sunset over Adelaide South Australia 1992. CSIRO via Wikimedia Commons. Source.

Bruce Pascoe. ABC Local. Source.

Read the Next Essay

Return to Table of Contents

https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/15446605

Download this essay as a PDF