

*Our Truths: Aboriginal
Writers and the Stolen
Generations*
by Anita Heiss



Written for *The BlackWords Essays*.

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Users are advised that AustLit contains information that may be culturally sensitive, including images of deceased persons.

Author's Note - 2019

Since 1930, when Theresa Clements wrote *From Old Maloga*, BlackWords authors have been publishing stories related to the experience and impacts of the Stolen Generations on individuals, families and whole communities. There are currently **750+ individual works about the Stolen Generations** indexed into BlackWords. These works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander creators and organisations include poetry, songs, columns, life stories and novels.

Titles published since this essay was written include: *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, *Growing Up Indigenous in Australia*, *Sorry Day* (Coral Vass & Dub Leffler), *Simply Ing* (Helen Nellie & Margaret O'Brien), *The Daly River Girl* (Tessa Rose) and *Alice's Daughter: Lost Mission Child* (Rhonda Collard-Spratt & Jackie Ferro).

You can also look at the [BlackWords Information Trail on the Stolen Generations](#).

Introduction

This paper extends the discussion of other papers in this collection in its use of government policy as a stimulus to writing. It shows how Aboriginal literature – and the ways its stories have morphed into other forms of media narratives – foregrounds broad political and social debates in the most intimate and engaging of ways. I aim here to demonstrate that stories, poetry, songs, plays and memoirs are ‘living’ evidence of truths otherwise untold or appropriated. The works referred to here are powerful and challenging.

Denial of identity, the heartache and pain of loss, and the physical removal from family, cultural practices and familiar surrounds were all part of the process of assimilating Aboriginal people into white society. This process of ‘disconnection’ was a significant strategy in Government policies of ‘protection’ in the 1800s, right through until the late 1960s.

Under a range of Government Acts and Policies of Protection carried out through the States and Territories of Australia, a community of removed children known as the Stolen Generations was created.

The Stolen Generations

In New South Wales there was a government body called the Aborigines Protection Board which was set up in 1883. In 1940 the Aborigine Protection Board changed its name to the Aborigines Welfare Board and they controlled Aborigines until 1969. There was one of these kinds of Boards in every state and territory of Australia. These boards thought that the only way Aboriginal children would have a good life was to take them away from their families to be raised in white families or orphanages, even though their real parents didn't want them to go.

The Government also had policies about Aborigines and these were called the NSW Aborigines Protection Act(s) between 1909 and 1943. These Acts meant that the Aborigines Protection Board had control of Aboriginal peoples' lives including how much money they got paid and who controlled that money, where Aborigines could travel around the country, where Aboriginal children went to school, and even whether Aboriginal people could speak their languages, dance their dances and practice their religions. It was the Aborigines Protection Acts that said it was all right to remove, steal, or take

Aboriginal children from their Aboriginal families and make them live somewhere else without telling the children why or letting them know where their families were.

Between 1915 and 1939, any station manager or policeman was also allowed to take Aboriginal children from their real families if he believed the children would be better off somewhere else, that is, with a white family, in a home or a training institution. The Government also said that Aborigines with mixed blood, that means someone who had one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal parent, could be given an Exemption Certificate.

This certificate was sometimes called a 'Dog Tag' and meant that anyone who received one was not to be treated like an Aborigine any more, but they also had to pretend they were white, and weren't allowed to have anything to do with their families.

The policies of protection and assimilation are the reason that so many Aboriginal families, communities and society suffered almost complete destruction. The children who were taken from their parents became known as the 'Stolen Generations' and number between 15 000 and 20 000 in NSW alone. Even during the First World War, when between 400 and 500 Aboriginal people served as soldiers, the Government still took Aboriginal children from their families, including children whose fathers were fighting overseas at the time. As late as 1957 the Aborigines Welfare Board advertised for white families to adopt Aboriginal children, so it didn't cost the Government as much to run homes (Heiss 189-192).

Testimonies in the Australian Government's Bringing Them Home: The 'Stolen Children' Report (1997) highlight the dramatic impact of policies of protection on both individuals and families. The effects of separation on children included traumatic loss; lives of anguish and social malformation; growing up starved of affection; emotional and physical abuse; and training for girls with the expectation that many would become domestic servants; and, for boys, that they would become stockmen, or learn a simple trade. Stolen children were taught to stay away from Aboriginal people and learned to be ashamed that they were black. The Children of the Stolen Generations were left in the middle because while they were made to feel too ashamed to join their Aboriginal communities, there were also rejected by the white community into which they were meant to be assimilated.

The effects of such policies on the members of the Aboriginal community who weren't themselves removed were also great. Parents, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts who were left behind were affected by the forced removal of a child. Across Australia Aboriginal families lived year after year with the fear that their children would be snatched from them and it was common that when a Government official appeared, in country areas, the children would often scatter into the bush. Some families fled to isolated places or kept moving ahead of the authorities.



32. BLUE MOUNTAIN SCENERY, WESTMORTH FALLS, NSW. (H. KING, PHOTO. SVS)

With this in mind, and the lack of literature throughout history discussing the actual practice of forced separation as a negative experience for Aboriginal children and their families, it's easy to understand why Aboriginal writers today are now publishing the stories of, about and for the Stolen Generations.

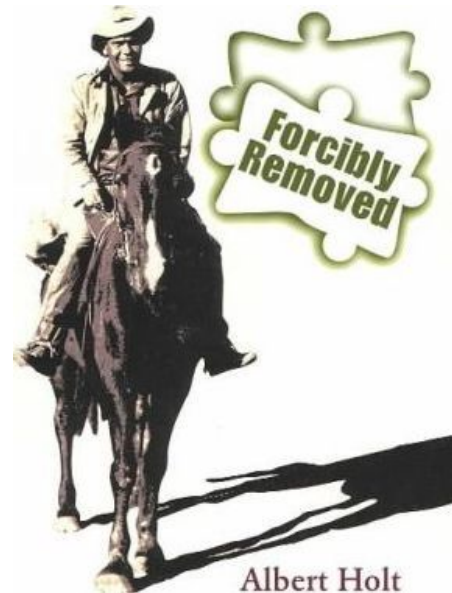
Many of the Stolen Children, now in adult life, have used the pen as means of healing the scars of removal, of telling their own stories of survival, and of trying to describe the enormous impact such policies had, and continue to have, on Aboriginal lives. They aim to provide a voice for Aboriginal Australia in telling the history of our country; a country that, until the formal Government Apology by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008, had denied the Stolen Generations even existed.

Our words, our books, our poems, our plays are 'our truths'.

There is a long list of works across a range of genres covering the various experiences of being forcibly removed. Over 470 individual works by more than 350 people have been indexed into the AustLit BlackWords dataset related to the subject of Stolen Generations. Below are a few key texts to give some foundation to understanding the reality of forced removal of Aboriginal children as told by Aboriginal people.

Auto/biography

Many one-time Aboriginal authors are those who write their autobiographies or memoirs or have their story told through biography. These personal accounts often unravel the painful experience of being removed under Acts of Protection nationally. The Cherbourg-Barambah experience has been documented by a number of distinguished Elders including [Albert Holt](#) and the late [Rita Huggins](#). A Bidjara Elder, Holt's memoir *Forcibly Removed* (Magabala Books, 2001) lays out the inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lives at the time. The Mission as described by Holt was a place where the white families had decent homes and the Aboriginal people were only allowed into town to work; where water would be carted from a tap a kilometre from their home; where the Murris were limited to fourth grade education; where a permit system restricted movement on and off the mission; and where segregation was a natural part of life with even the ablutions blocks signposted with "Not for the convenience of Natives".



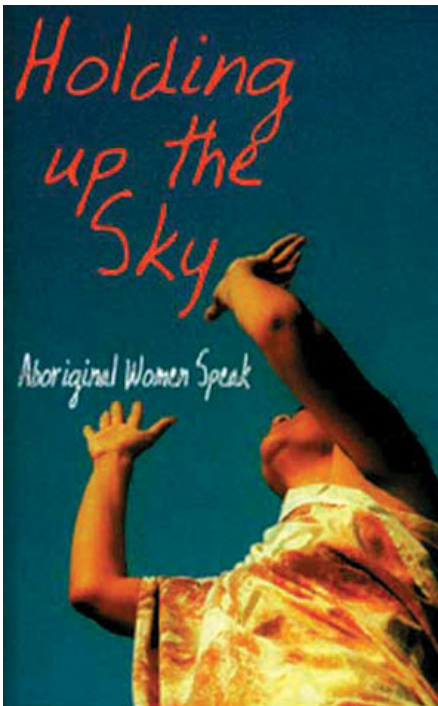
Courtesy of publisher (self-published edition)

Similar to many other reserves and missions around the country, Cherbourg-Barambah was an area of land where Aboriginal people were forced to live together to free up other more viable land for farming. These traditionally owned areas were then offered as land grants to new settlers or maintained by the Crown.

By moving Aboriginal people off their own land, it served to disconnect individuals and whole communities from their sense of place and connection to country, community to their own communities, and their identities, which served to assist the governments desire for assimilation.

Auntie Rita (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) is the biography of the late Bidjara woman, [Rita Huggins](#) as told to her daughter, [Jackie Huggins](#), who also has Birri-Gubba Juru heritage. Aunty Rita was stolen from her country as a child in the 1920s, and taken to the Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve. She remembers her first meeting with a white man — a trooper who, with other white men, forced her people into cattle trucks before driving them south. The Cherbourg years were ones of imprisonment, under the so-called Aborigines Protection Act, as the cover blurb to Aunty Rita indicates:

'We had to stay in one place now, while the white men could roam free.'



Betty Lockyer (Nyul Nyul), author of the short essay “War Baby” in the anthology of women’s stories *Holding up the Sky* (Magabala Books, 1999) was born in 1942 in Beagle Bay, Western Australia, on the cultural and traditional land of her grandmother, and her story touches on the Stolen Generations as she writes:

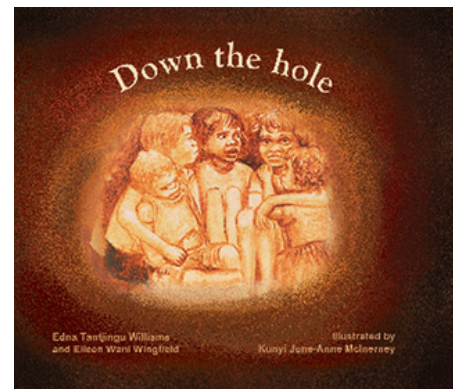
The kids I grew up with at the mission, and later on at the orphanage in Broome, were like lost souls, plucked out from loved ones' arms, herded like cattle into holding yards and then dumped with strangers in a frightening environment. (25)

Children's Literature

Some consider teaching young people about the Stolen Generations as something too serious, too dark, or too emotional for children. Perhaps some think that it is too difficult a subject for kids to grasp in the classroom, especially in the 21st century. Firstly, it is the responsibility of educators to ensure Australian students know a complete and inclusive version of Australian history, their shared history. Secondly, our ability to be humane is drawn from our ability to empathise and understand the lives of others, particularly those the same age as us, in different geographic locations and at different moments of time in history.

Two books written for children that capture the experience of the removal for Aboriginal children are *Down the Hole, Up the Tree, Across the Sandhills: Running From the State and Daisy Bates* (IAD Press, 2000) by Edna Tantjingu Williams (Yankunytjatjara), Eileen Wani Wingfield (Kokatha / Arabana), and illustrated by Kunyi June-Anne McInerney (Yankunytjatjara) and *Bush Games and Knucklebones* by Doris Kartinyeri, also illustrated by Kunyi June-Anne McInerney.

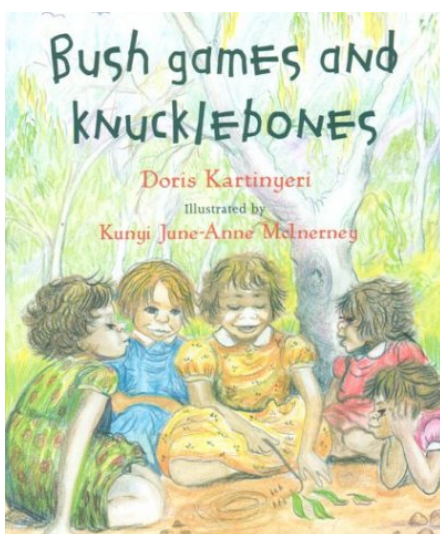
Down the Hole is a true story of the “The State People” stealing children, “just kidnapping them”, as part of the policy of “protection” in South Australia. *Down the Hole* is a children’s book that takes very complex aspects of history and politics and translates and simplifies them to help both children and adults to understand, engage with and try to relate to real-life events and their consequences.



Courtesy of IAD Press

The story tells of Edna, originally from Tarcoola, and Eileen of Ingomar Station, and the experiences they had as children avoiding the dreaded “State People”, who visited Coober Pedy where the girls grew up. We read of children hiding in bushes and thrown down holes with food sent down by rope, and the extraordinary lengths parents went to ensure their children weren’t taken. These were the days when the Old People would also “noodle for opals”. The book puts into everyday terms for young people and teachers in the classroom why the children were hiding. The illustrations by Kunyi June-Anne McInerney, herself taken at a young age when she was known as Kunyi and placed in the Oodnadatta Children’s Mission where she was renamed Anne, are life-like and at times sombre but not depressing.

In contrast, *Bush Games and Knucklebones* tells a different story to most books on the Stolen Generations. It looks at happy young children playing games while being in Colebrook Children’s Home, at Oodnadatta in South Australia.



Courtesy of Magabala Books

The author [Doris Kartinyeri](#) spent 14 years at Colebrook after being taken from her family soon after birth and, for her, the book is a tribute to how the children at the home bonded to become a family for each other. Her book tells how they entertained themselves as children, playing games like ‘knucklebones’, also known in the 1970s as the game of ‘jacks’. The rules for knucklebones and kick the tin are provided at the end of the book, so children today can also enjoy the innocent and inexpensive games of the past rather than violent video games of the present.

The book shares the stories of ‘secret gardens’ and ‘created playgrounds’ where all the children ‘were interested in was the fun of building a pretend bus or truck’. Accompanying the text are the signature illustrations by [Kunyi June-Anne McInerney](#).

The final lines of the book read “We played these games daily – they made us happy and we shared with the other kids. Do you play imaginary games?” (27). This brings into reality the shared experience of children being children, with imagination and no boundaries to friendship.

Poetry and Song

A well-known anthem for many Stolen Children, their families and communities, is singer /songwriter [Bobby Randall](#)’s “[Brown Skin Baby](#)”. Randall himself was removed by police as a young child and taken to the notorious Bungalow in Alice Springs, before being sent to Darwin, Goulburn and Croker Islands. His lyrics capture the pain of never being reunited with his parents or siblings ever again.

*The child grew up
And had to go
From a mission home
That he loved so
To find his mother
He tried in vain
Upon this earth
They never met again. (31)*

These lyrics also capture that ambiguity in Aunty Doris’s story – love of the mission home and ties made there in the absence of other connections to country and family.

Wadi Wadi poet [Barbara Nicholson](#)’s “[The Bastards](#)” is a short history lesson in the destruction caused by the white controllers of Aboriginal lives - the government, the police and the church - and of the heartache of mothers who had children literally ripped from their arms under the Policy of Protection. She writes:

*“You don’ take that kid,” she cried, she yelled, she wailed
at the men in the pinstripe suits and fedora hats.
“Come back here with my babies, don’t take my babies, my babies, my babies.”
But they didn’t listen,
Listen to the heartache*

*Didn't listen as she ran, arms stretched out in longing, embracing nothing,
 Didn't listen to the moaning,
 And they gloated
 And they took them, put them in homes, took the babies away.
 Bastards. (26)*

Similarly, the late Emeratta writer [Errol West](#)'s "Please Mista Do'n Take Me Chilen" demonstrates the painful pleas of the parents who had children taken from them callously under the Policy of Protection. He writes:

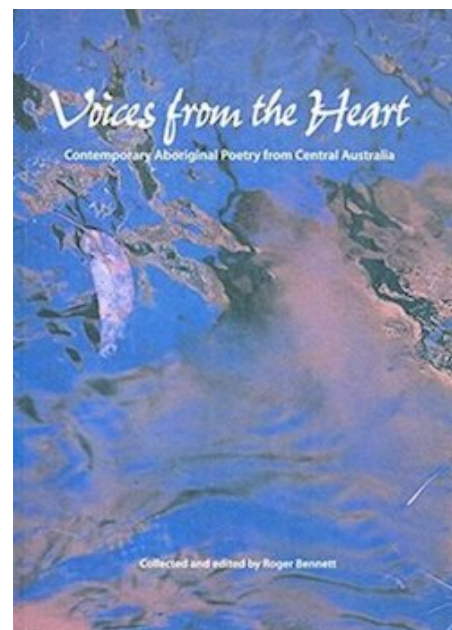
*"Please mista do'n take me chilen, please mista do'n"
 These words echo through the channels of my heart and mind...
 The devastation visited on the Aborigine is the holocaust of

 The explosion of the nuclear family – in our people, the
 Family goes on and on – it is as endless as we are. (25)*

The consequences for and experiences of removed children is expressed by Jawoyn / Eastern Arrente poet [Vanessa Melly Kruger](#) in her work "The Lost Race".

*Lost identities, culture and law
 Deprived of our families, mother and all
 Taken as children away from our homes
 With only vague memories of the love we had known
 Today we're still seeking to find what we lost
 But there's no compensation that could meet the cost.

 Still searching, still hoping
 Still denied our rights –
 Suffer on little children of the half-caste race
 For where we belong no one ever will know. (35)*



Courtesy of IAD Press

And the painful heartache of children as victims is portrayed in [Ivy Dodd](#)'s "The Stolen Ones":

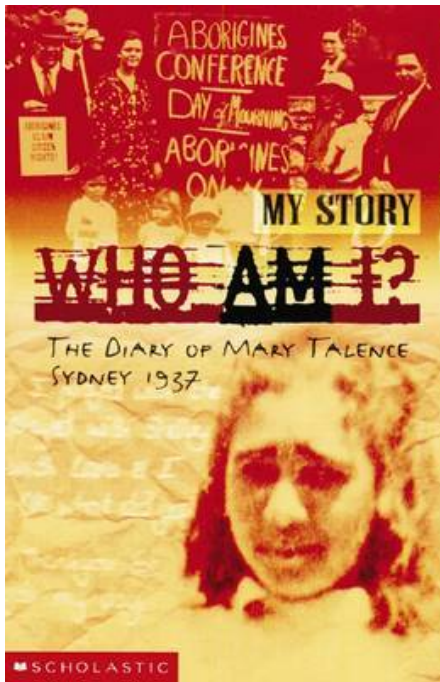
*Can anyone hear the children weep?
not out loud
but in their sleep?
Sounds like hurt
held deep inside,
like they don't know
what they all hide. (51)*

Malak Malak playwright and poet [Eva Johnson](#) is cutting in her use of language to define what really happened in the name of “Protection” –

*They set up a board with a policy
To bring up our children as white as could be
Stealing them first from our black family
All in the name of PROTECTION. (29)*

Fiction

There are award-winning novels focussing on the Stolen Generations. For middle-upper primary-aged readers there is my own novel *Who Am I? : The Diary of Mary Talence : Sydney, 1937* (Scholastic, 2001). This historical novel deals with the emotional, psychological and physical journey of one girl who is removed 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. Within that journey we see the destructive forces of the assimilation policy and how government policies attempted – and often achieved – the disconnection of Aboriginal people from their true identities.

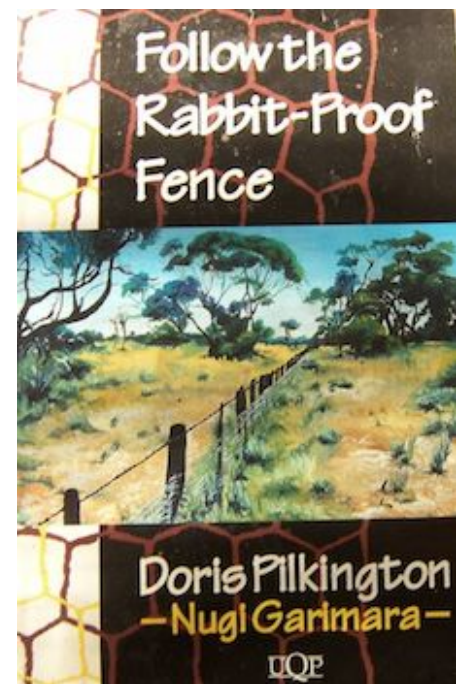


Courtesy of Scholastic

Mary’s character also serves to demonstrate the confusion around identity for young children removed and raised with white families under the Act. I wrote *Who Am I?* to give a voice to those who are without one: those who don’t have access to publishing or have the ability to tell their stories, whose lives previously hadn’t been taught about in the classroom. Although I knew the need for and importance of writing a novel for young people on the Stolen Generations, I feared getting it wrong for those who needed their story told, so I sent drafts to Link-Up New South Wales (an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support service), Eileen Stevens (who had spent nine years in Bomaderry and whom I’d met through Link-Up and interviewed for the novel) and [Barbara Nicholson](#) (a senior Aboriginal woman removed from her father at the age of four). I was motivated to write this work because I wanted to voice ‘our truths’ as we know them, and I am relieved when I have community members young and old tell me they are grateful for the story of Mary Talence.

Although Mary is fictional, her experiences represent the experiences of thousands of Aboriginal children (now adults) as documented in numerous publications, particularly the report on a government inquiry entitled *Bringing Them Home: The ‘Stolen Children’ Report 1997* (1997), which included submissions from 777 people or organisations, and detailed painful evidence of the 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.

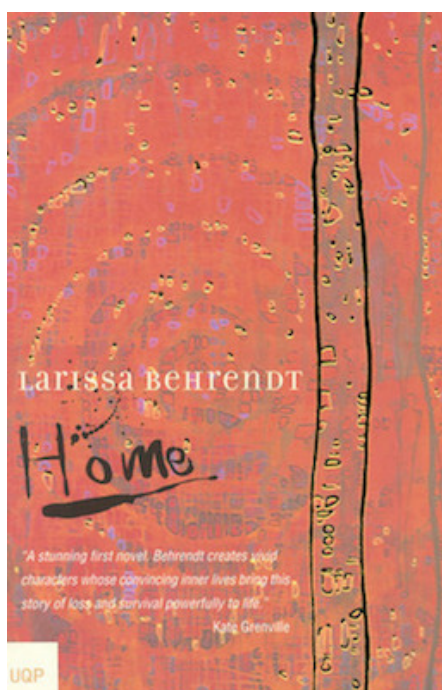
[Doris Pilkington’s](#) *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (UQP, 1996) is the true account of her mother Molly’s extraordinary 1,600 kilometre walk home across remote Western Australia. The story was made legendary by [Phillip Noyce’s](#) feature film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002).



Courtesy of UQP

Nugi Garimara is Doris Pilkington's Aboriginal, or Mardu, name. She was born on Balfour Downs Station approximately sixty kilometres west of Jigalong Community in the East Pilbara. At the age of four she and her mother were forcibly brought from Jigalong to Moore River Native Settlement. In 1931 Molly led her two sisters from the Moore River Native Settlement back to their family at Jigalong. Aged 8, 11 and 14, they escaped the confinement of a government institution for taken / stolen Aboriginal children. Barefoot, without provisions or maps, tracked by Native Police and search planes, the girls followed the rabbit-proof fence, knowing it would lead them home.

Larissa Behrendt is from the Kamilaroi and Eualeyai peoples and her multi-award winning novel *Home* (UQP, 2004) begins with Candice arriving at “the place where the rivers meet” and the reader is taken on a journey into the past and through the present with this young law student, who feels more at home with the *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* than the company of her family. We learn, through Behrendt’s well-crafted story, of a family history riddled with pain, of the loss of connection to family and country, and we are given painful insights into three separate incidents of removing children.



Courtesy of UQP

We learn the story of stolen Garibooli (renamed Elizabeth) whose own son Euroke, conceived through rape, is taken from her at birth, adopted by an Irish family, renamed Neil O’Reilly and told he’s Italian. Elizabeth’s brother Euroke is also stolen and becomes Sonny Boney.

Elizabeth marries Grigor Brecht, has six more children and finally has a family of her own, creating a ‘home’ for herself and her kin. When she dies of a heart condition her three youngest children are taken by welfare and we read of their journeys, in and then out of an orphanage. It’s a depressing, yet compelling read. There were moments in the text where my eyes welled as memories of my own family were brought to the surface.

Home’s uniqueness is in having some of the story set in the 1990s, which will help the reader understand the way in which policies of the past continue to impact on Indigenous people in a contemporary setting.

Conclusion

It is highly unlikely that many Australians will read the *Bringing Them Home* report to gain an understanding of a significant part of Australian history – though they should. That’s why these works about the Stolen Generations, for young adult and adult readers in poetry, fiction and autobiography are valuable. They not only fill a void in the official documented history of government policy in relation to the forced removal of Aboriginal children, but the forms in which these stories are presented mean that they are accessible to a range of readers.

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