

BlackWords: Aboriginal children's literature about country

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(Author's note: Some of the material in this essay comes and is updated from the previously published 'Aboriginal Writers on the Significance of Space, Sense of Place and Connection to Country'. *Making Waves: 10 years of the Byron Bay Writers Festival*, edited by Marele Day, Susan Bradley Smith and Fay Knight, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2006.)

This paper addresses stereotypical ideas about living on/in 'Country' and explains the complexities and contemporary usages of the term in engaging and understandable ways. The sub-headings map and direct the flow of ideas, themes, issues and dreaming(s) addressed in each location and the texts explore and illustrate the subtleties and layers of usage. The paper uses both the terms Dreaming and Dreamtime to reflect the way individual authors have defined or labeled their work. All titles discussed here are written for children but some are also discussed in the accompanying essay, 'Serious Issues for Young Readers', about writing for young adults, as they are books used with reluctant readers or those with low literacy skills.

When we talk of traditional 'Country' ... we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians... we might mean homeland or tribal or clan area and we might mean more than just a place on a map. For us Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. (Dodson 15)

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of Aboriginal authored children's and young adult literature published that focus on the 'meaning of place' in an Indigenous context. Many of these works have a school audience in mind. More specifically, urban stories are being written as a matter of priority. This is demonstrated by the release of the *Yarning Strong* Oxford University Literacy Project, and launched by education hero Chris Sarra (also the author of *Good Morning, Mr Sarra*) at the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence in Redfern in March 2011. The day marked the release of a ground-breaking Indigenous teaching resource never seen in Australia before, covering themes of identity, family, law and land.

***Yarning Strong - Dreaming in Urban Areas*ⁱ**

The *Yarning Strong* series is made up of twelve 64-page novels; four 48-page graphic novels; and four anthologies comprising poems, artworks, factual descriptions, plays, and other material. The series covers four themes: Land, Family, Identity and Law. The Land theme is relevant to this discussion.

All stories were written by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander writers and a committee of respected Indigenous educators guided the development and content of the series. Each theme includes a Behind the Stories DVD, a Professional Support CD-ROM and a 160-page Professional Support manual.

The *Yarning Strong Land Anthology* complements the novels within the Land theme and includes a wealth of information to supplement the issues covered in the novels, including details on the difference between a welcome to and an acknowledgement of country, the differences between Indigenous seasons and the introduced European seasons, and an introduction to Eddie Koiki Mabo and the history of Native Title. The song lyrics to the anthem 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', about the walk off of the Gurindji people from Wave Hill station in the NT in demand for the return of their land, and the beginning of the land rights movement in Australia, is also included.

The *Land* theme

Through the novels and the support materials, non-Indigenous kids will gain insights into the lives of contemporary Indigenous kids while Indigenous kids will read exciting, fun stories that reflect their lives in contemporary urban Australia. It is believed the series will provide the spring board for classroom discussions on each title and theme, assist in dispelling stereotypical, and often negative, racial assumptions (i.e., that all Aboriginal people live in the desert, that we do not contribute to Australian daily life through employment, that we are not educated and so on) while also working to promote understanding and celebrate difference.

Within the *Land* theme the novels include *Dallas Davis, the Scientist and the City Kids* (OUP, 2011) written by Nukunu man Dr Jared Thomas. The story is based on the way the author's 'own family works with many people including scientists, to protect Nukunu traditional lands' (Thomas 62) and describes how Dallas is angry when he has to visit his family's land instead of going to the footy. Then he learns just how important is his knowledge of country.

Gayle Kennedy, who was born in Ivanhoe, NSW and is a member of the Wongaiibon clan of the Nyaampa-speaking nation of South-West NSW, penned two novels in the *Land* series. The first, *Common Ground* (OUP, 2011) is a story focusing on a land rights claim while *More than Just a Piece of Land* (OUP, 2011), illustrated by Ross Carnsew, is a graphic novel focusing on the adjustments a family (including teenage kids) have to make when moving from a multicultural suburb back to their traditional lands 'in the middle of nowhere' (*More Than* 11). The premise of the story is the need to understand the importance of and relationship to ancestral land, regardless of where families may have moved to over time, either by choice or by force.

Demon Guards the School Yard (OUP, 2011), by Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss with the students of La Perouse Public School, was the sequel to *Yirra and her Deadly Dog, Demon* (ABC Books, 2007), and the fourth novel in the *Land* series. In both novels, the students who

lived on the local mission or nearby suburbs of Matraville, Malabar and Little Bay were all involved in developing the stories which focused on their schooling and social lives on Dharawal land. They follow the adventures of a Siberian husky named Demon, and his owner, the young girl, Yirra.

The main premise for the sequel was to look at the way urban-based Aboriginal people can still act as caretakers and custodians of country. Caretakers are people who may not come from the area in which they live while custodians are the traditional owners.

In *Demon Guards the School Yard* the student authors were given the opportunity to talk about local native plants through the storyline of building a harmony garden at the school – which the students have actually done. It also allowed them to talk about coastal living and responsibility for caring for Country, as well as understanding rock art around the Bondi Beach area. In one of his random raps, the charismatic popular student Matt performs for the students, reminding them that their urban identity and location doesn't mean that they can shirk their responsibilities to Country. He sings:

*“Listen my peeps keep digging that garden,
While I tell you about our land.
My nan and pop told me stories,
They're important and they're grand.
Land is basic to our well-being
We call her Mother Earth.
It's not just soil and rocks and minerals
It's related to our birth.
The land round here is Dharawal
We all live by the sea.
No matter where or how you live
Be proud to be Koori.
Even though we live in 'burbs,
With buildings, cars and roads,
We are still caretakers of our country,
And we have important codes.
Like how to treat the place we live
And respect for what is ours
So don't throw rubbish, always recycle,
Try and plant more flowers.
I'm not a nomad or a hunter
I'm a deadly urban Koori.
But I still care about the land,
And especially the sea.
Cong Wong, La Pa and Yarra Bay
We spend our summers there.
Just swimming, fishing, hanging out
Breathing in sea air.
To protect Aboriginal history,
We have to protect the land,
We can make this garden a sacred site,
And protect it, yes we can.
We can plant native trees and vegetables
Berries and other food.
Anyone who messes with our place,
Will be disrespectful and rude.*

*To protect our sacred garden
We need to have some rules.
First we need a roster,
And someone to mind the tools.
We might need a bigger fence,
To protect the saplings first
All this planning is hard work,
It's giving me a thirst." (Demon 27-29)*

Both *Yirra* novels give young Australian readers a contemporary view of an urban Aboriginal world in coastal Sydney, and the process of developing the novel included gathering feedback from local Elders and the Local Aboriginal Land Council. The work also puts La Perouse on the map for something more than the fact that the French landed there, and Tom Cruise shot some scenes for *Mission: Impossible II* at Bare Island Fort.

Writing from semi-remote Country

When talking about Country, expectations are often based upon the interior, red earth, remote communities, but as we have seen there are now more stories being written about urban areas, and even semi-remote areas. *My Home Broome* (Magabala, 2012) explains the six seasons of the region, the meaning and history of Broome's annual festival of the pearl - the 'Shinju-Matsuri'. It discusses some local Yawuru bush-tucker names and reveals that the bush fruit yaminyarri is one of the greatest sources of Vitamin C in the world, and that Broome once had its own dinosaur, the meat-eating *Megalosaurus Broomensis*.

Tamzyne Richardson (descended from the Yawuru and Bardi people of the Kimberley region) and Bronwyn Houston (descended from the Nyiyaparli and Yindjibarndi people of the Pilbara region) worked with twelve talented students from Broome's primary schools – as part of a publishing project celebrating the cultural diversity and talent of the Broome community. The students learnt a range of techniques to produce illustrations inspired by Tamzyne's poem – which is the centrepiece of the book - and the richness of Broome's history and its people. The complete work – Tamzyne's poem, historical information boxes, local knowledge and illustrations - gives a colourful and intimate insight into what the coastal community has to offer, through the eyes and words of the student authors with Bronwyn Houston.

Tamzyne writes:

*I live in a place where the sand is smooth and turtles nest on Cable Beach.
I live in a place where the sun sets over the Indian Ocean. My home Broome. (12)*

Stories from remote Anangu Country

The *Papunya School Book of Country and History* (Allen & Unwin, 2001) was created by Anangu staff and students at the Papunya School in the Northern Territory in collaboration with children's author Nadia Wheatley and illustrator Ken Searle. The book talks about the community and country 200 kilometres west of Alice Springs, where the Anangu (the Aboriginal people of the central desert region) are the traditional owners of the land, and

where English and Luritja is spoken at school, with the languages of many countries spoken at home.

This multi-genre book is a compilation of drawings, paintings (including dot), time-lines and information boxes that provides a comprehensive understanding of the history of Papunya since the first tjulkura (white people) appeared in their ngurra (Country) and the local people feared them as mamu (ghosts or devils). The reader travels visually through the history of stolen land, of the killing of stock and the Anangu people's resistance to colonization. It shows the arrival of white explorers and missionaries brandishing the gospel, the "devils in the sky" (i.e., airplanes) and the establishment of the first school in Papunya in 1960. It moves on to the 1992 High Court decision on Native Title that led to the handing back of the sacred site of Pulka Karrinyarra (what whitefellas call Mt Wedge) in July 1999. These are all significant moments in the history of Papunya, and it is the simplicity of the book that makes such complex issues and events so accessible to all ages and literacy levels.

In the section, 'A New Way to Paint Country', we learn in one paragraph about how Arrente man Albert Namatjira began painting landscapes, while Mary Malbunka's painted map gives an aerial view of how Haasts Bluff looked when she was a five year old child, and offers a straightforward understanding of where the school lay in relation to the 'ration place', 'the whitefella's house', the church, water tank, and the road to Alice Springs. The time-lines offer simple yet significant notes on what happened and when in the region and nationally.

Another Anangu story that focuses on the history of devastation to Country and community is *Maralinga: The Anangu Story*, written and illustrated by the Yalata and Oak Valley Communities with Christobel Mattingley (Allen and Unwin, 2009). This picture book is of cultural and historical significance, telling the story of the earliest beginnings of the Anangu people – the knowledge of their Country, their relationship to water and the desert, how skilled they were at finding bush foods like red roo, emu, wombat and snake. The story tells of the local invasion and settlement and how whitefellas claimed a place they had no connection to, giving their own names to sacred sites, and building the Transcontinental Railway from Port Augusta to Kalgoorlie which opened in 1917. The construction workers introduced the Anangu to tobacco, tea, sugar, white flour and alcohol.

The process of developing this important resource was as significant as the book itself. *Maralinga: The Anangu Story* was created through extensive research and community consultation, in the style of the *Papunya School Book of Country and History* (Allen and Unwin, 2001). Yalata and Oak Valley community Elders joined multi-award winning (non-Indigenous) author Christobel Mattingley as storytellers, translators and artists to tell the story of what they experienced at Maralinga, before the bomb and after.

Every page explodes with colour and different styles of painting, but also black and white photos that provide another form of recorded history for the reader, showing the Anangu story, as we learn, for example, of some aspects of mission life at Ooldea.

It's the descriptions of life during nuclear testing, however, that is likely to stay with readers. In 1953, a year after the Ooldea Mission closed it was announced in Britain and Australia that atomic weapons were to be tested in an area which was an Aboriginal reserve. The Long Range Weapons Establishment issued assurances that Aboriginal people would not be affected by the trials. Testimonies by Anangu people in the book tell of walking and working the land where the testings took place, without warnings of the dangers or consequences. The

whitefellas wore masks when around drums of poison and dismantling buildings, but the blackfellas didn't even have shoes. Stories of families in the area at the time of testing tell of still-born babies and premature births, infants dying of brain tumours and heart conditions, others being born with physical deformities or developing epilepsy as young children. Clearly the community had not been protected from the dangers of testing.

This is a history book for all Australians, but it's also an important resource for the classroom (with teachers notes available on the publisher's website). A glossary at the back helps to instill the understanding that the Pitjanjatjara language is a living language spoken most widely by the Western desert peoples.

Writing from the desert to the tropics

The often-missed story or discussion about Country is that of tropical Australia with its lush landscapes and opal blues of the surrounding seas. Thankfully *Creatures of the Rainforest* (Magabala, 2005) written by Anna Eglitis and Warren Brim explores the Djabugay country of far north Queensland. Warren Brim is an Aboriginal man from the Djabugay clan and Anna Eglitis is a Fijian born Australian of European descent. The pair met while Brim was a student of Eglitis' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts course at North Queensland TAFE.

Creatures of the Rainforest combines artworks and factual information, as well as Aboriginal language and information from the Djabugay people of the area. The artists have studied a number of rainforest species, from an ant to the zamia palm, the mosquito to the quandong. It's also provides an interesting way of teaching young children the alphabet, as each artist presents their own personal and cultural perspectives on each of the living organism discussed. The book is aimed at upper-primary age children to use as a starting point for further research into Australian native animals and plants, and for Aboriginal studies.

Caring for Country

Caring for Country is something that Aboriginal writers are considering in picture books regardless of where they live. Gladys and Jill Milroy are the mother and sister to renowned author Sally Morgan and playwright David Milroy (Palku), so storytelling runs through their veins. Their ability to use such skill is demonstrated brilliantly in this cleverly written, beautifully illustrated, yet serious kid's book titled *Dingo's Tree* (Magabala, 2001).

The main character Dingo and his friends Moon, Magpie, Wombat and Little Tree (who becomes Walking Tree) present an engaging and colourful environmental story for kids. It's about the effects of mining on the landscape; where poles replace trees, where mining cuts scars so deep into Country it will never heal, where raindrops are tears and where the living creatures have to work together to survive. The question posed is when the river stops flowing and the mountains are cut away and all the trees felled, what happens to the wildlife?

This picture book for lower primary will help young readers to understand a significant challenge the world faces today, and how the issue of environmental awareness needs to be incorporated into home life and the education system.

As early as 2005, Aboriginal Studies Press released the title *The Rain Flower*, a beautifully written and illustrated book, telling the story of rain flowers and their role in maintaining a

lush environment. While it is not a traditional Dreamtime story, author Mary Duroux of the Yuin nation says she has used the knowledge passed onto her by her Elders.

The story revolves around life near a dried-up waterhole, where the characters are night creatures (possum, wombat, bandicoot, curlew and owl) and day creatures (kangaroo, cockatoo, emu, echidna, pelican and goanna) who all struggle to find the special flower that will make it rain. The creatures all work together as a community to find the plant with pink flowers and a red stalk.

The story is complemented with both black and white and colour illustrations by Karen Briggs (Yorta Yorta) who, as an artist, is inspired by the Barmah State Forest.

As with most Indigenous authored children's books, the purpose of *The Rain Flower*, beyond encouraging young Indigenous kids to read, is to also encourage young people to learn tolerance and how to work together. It's also a timely environmental story given the drought in parts of Australia over many years, and it highlights the negative effects changes in weather can have on Earth's creatures. The book is pitched at 6-7 year olds and is designed for young people to read aloud.

The Rain Flower is an exception-to-the-publishing-rule for Aboriginal Studies Press, who have only published nine children's books in its nearly 50-year history. Their other children's titles include *Bittabgee Tribe* (2009), *The Little Platypus and the Fire Spirit* (2009), and *The Legend of the Seven Sisters* (2009).

Conclusion

The books discussed here and others discoverable through the BlackWords database speak for themselves in terms of the learning opportunities they provide for Australian children. In classrooms, libraries, home bookshelves, and for international tourists, these books reveal the essence of Aboriginal storytelling and help to train children in the art of listening to stories when they are read out loud. The works showcase the diversity of life in different parts of Indigenous Australia and are born out of different histories, cultures, languages, identities, aspirations, and realities of the First Peoples of Australia today.

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ⁱ Lisa Belleair coined the phrase 'Dreaming in Urban Areas', which became the title of her poetry collection released through UQP in 1996.