

Born of this land

I am born of this land and it has always been in my blood.

From early school holidays to the coast, where the wild seas thrilled me and the wind swept dunes nestled my solitary figure. To the territory for three years where I was privy to some of Australia's most spectacular landscapes; where I came to understand the feeling of sacredness of land. A gorge, a waterfall, a sheltered creek bank, sheer cliff faces that reached to the sky demanding as much respect as the mightiest of cathedrals. I am born of this land, it is in my blood.

But the stories of this land are not my stories, yet and I grow more determined.

I know the path will be winding and long but it is time to make our way through the minefields of hurt and injustice, misappropriation and litigation. It is time to reach out our hand and ask our indigenous brothers and sisters to show us the way.

I want my children to hear the stories of the land and as a storyteller I want to help keep the stories alive.

It has often been said amongst the storytellers that there are only five basic stories and every other story told or written is a variation of these five. These inner wisdom's have been clothed by many different cultures in ways that pertained to their particular landscape and values. We share this landscape with indigenous Australians and yet we are looking at it from different angles. But the tide is turning, there is a slow groundswell and yearning for shared stories.

Witness the unifying effects of "the Australian Story," courtesy of the The Olympics and the pride all Australians took in our indigenous culture. We need to move forward together but with a shared dreaming. A dreaming that will sustain our hearts and souls as well as our landscape and environment.

But there is still a lot of pain, not only did we take their land and their children , now we try to take their culture.

Joseph Wambugu Githhaiga, a Law Graduate from Western Australia's Murdoch Universtiy writes in a thoughtful, lengthy discourse on, Intellectual Property Law and the Protection of Indigenous Folklore and Knowledge . He explains the intricate web of associations present in aboriginal folklore and mythology and he argues that to try and protect these intricacies with copyright laws is 'beyond the scope of western private property rights' 'Indigenous people regard intellectual and real property to be so intimately linked that no meaningful distinction can be made between the two. Indigenous designs... represent the title deeds of land ownership.'

In the title of Githhaiga's paper the notion of protectionism reflects the fear of letting go, the fear of losing their culture for someone else's benefit, the reluctance to share their stories. I feel hurt and ashamed that Indigenous Australian's brief history with white fella's has left them so suspicious.

In his suggested protocols for reform he states that 'artists, writers and performers should desist from unauthorised incorporation of indigenous heritage in their works. Instead they

should support the artistic and cultural development of indigenous peoples and participate in public awareness campaigns to promote indigenous art and culture.'

This indigenous heritage is the heritage of the landscape and before we can walk forward together we must share the stories. As oral historians and storytellers we ask to help with the task.

You were once experts in the oral tradition your storytellers and song men told the tales but now before they are lost we seek permission, like your apprentices, to help keep the stories alive.

As Margaret Read MacDonald says, 'When the legends die, the dream ends. When the dreams end there is no more greatness.'

Aboriginal culture is a dynamic culture and it has changed dramatically since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. Where many proud nations once lived on the land now communities are spread from remote to rural areas; in provincial towns and major cities, they are all culturally distinct and regional names recognise this. For instance in East Arnhem Land, live the Yolgnu people, in Victoria are the Koori's and in Queensland, Murry's live along the east coast, to name a few.

The colour of their skin may range from pale cream to dark blue black, like an old fella I had a beer with in the Nhulunbuy Pub. But it's not the colour of your skin that defines you as aboriginal but your sense of identity, your kinship's and relation to the land. I am too born of this land and I long to tell it 's stories.

As a storyteller I have always been aware and respectful of the protocols in telling and receiving aboriginal stories and I bring your attention to a great paper produced by ALIA (Australian Libraries ? ?) called Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for libraries, archives and Information Services. While it doesn't specifically relate to telling of stories it 'deals with Indigenous intellectual property issues' and acts as a guideline, for collecting indigenous material and relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The guidelines remind us that 'there is information that is restricted, that our children can not learn about, there is information that is restricted even to adults, there is information that is of a secret or sacred nature, that many people have no knowledge of or access to. That knowledge is only there for certain people to have access to.' (Gularrwuy Yunupingu, 1986)

I accept this restriction but ask only to tell the nursery rhymes, the folktales.

Aboriginal culture, also, has much to teach us about caring for our environment.

For too long in the stories (and libraries)... 'we have been referred to and catalogued as 'savages' or 'primitive' while Western industrial peoples are referred to as advanced and complex. (Mick Dodson, 1993)

This was brought home to me recently when I was researching a story to tell at Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. There was a new painting I wanted to tell a story about. A young girl emerges bedraggled from rough emerald green waves capped with frothy white horses.

I recollected a story from the old Victorian Readers, Year Four Book, 'A Brave Australian Girl.' Her name was Grace Bussell and she was billed as the Grace Darling of Australia, a similar story told of a young girl in England who had saved the passengers of a floundering vessel off the coast. In the Australian version she was accompanied by a 'black servant', no name, no identity just a black servant.

However, surfing the net, I found the hidden story. The black servant was a thirty year old employee of the homestead where Grace lived and he spotted the ship heading for the reef. His name was Sam Isaacs Yebble and he was the son of an indigenous women from the Margaret River region and his dad was a native American Indian sailor who had jumped ship. Busselton was named for Grace's family and their still there running a winery. There's a shared story, aboriginal people, also, must be able to look to the stories with pride, it is us that must look at them in shame at our ignorant forbears.

When I look at the question theoretically the task seems ominous the subject feels heavy but in reality it's different.

Yesterday on my birthday as I waited for my parents to arrive in Ballarat and shout me a 'gourmet' lunch, I decided to head for the Aboriginal Co-operative. I was curious to know if they had any info on the stories of native flowers. I've heard Frances Firebrace tell 'Why the Waratah is red' and I wanted to know if they knew anymore.

They invited me for a morning cuppa and in joyous spirits we swapped stories, I found out that tall, jovial, smiling Merv had a birthday the following day. I shared my knowledge of the stories of the Wathourong people, (the local Tribe), my travels to the territory, my love of great myths and legends. We even talked of training up some of their teenage kids and having them interview some of the elders before it's too late, before the stories disappear. And it is with a great sense of pride that I report on the issue of telling indigenous stories: "We'll if a black fella's not telling them, I reckon you'd be the next best thing."

Throughout my travels, my interviews with indigenous tellers for 'Swag' and my insistence on raising the issue, I have found aboriginal people, on the whole, to be incredibly generous of spirit. They approach life with tremendous humour and are always first to make joke at their own expense. 'Reconciliation' walks in all major capitals have shown the growing support from the wider community, inroads are being made into breaking down the barriers. Shared stories will certainly strengthen these inroads and I look forward to the shared path.

After 23 years of this storytelling apprenticeship I have a clear direction of the path I wish to follow. Along with the great myths and legends that inform my Celtic inheritance and world mythology, thanks to great folklore collections in libraries I have worked, will stand the stories of our country.

In my family we have recently welcomed niece, Aretha Eileen Anne Stewart, born of Paul Stewart of the StKilda/Elwood clan and Donna Brown of the Gumbaingirr Mob from the Nambucca Heads region of NSW. More than ever I know, as Aretha's indigenous Grandma says; 'Annie you need to make sure you tell all the stories, for all the kids'

Anne Eileen Stewart

