

Pat Torres

Cable Beach in Broome seems like an idyllic holiday location, beautiful tropical weather and miles and miles of clean, white sandy beaches. As a tourist you could stay in eco friendly huts by the beach or camp in the caravan park by the river. At night after gorging on local seafood and fruits you could wash it all down with a couple of cleansing ales at the Roebuck Hotel, but that's white fella dreaming, a European perspective. It could be any other tropical location in the world transported to far north-western Australia. You would get no feel for the richness and diversity of an age-old culture.

Talk to Pat Torres and this vibrant, generous woman paints a different picture, another reality, a landscape and a people that date back thousands and thousands of years to the dreamtime. A woman determined to preserve the culture and stories for future generations and to educate people about a totally different belief system.

"When I talk to children at schools I separate one strand of my hair and remind them that white man's history in Australia is like this compared to our history, my whole head of hair."

"These are the stories of my land and my people," says Torres. "But you must be aware that you should never generalise about Aboriginal people. Our Kimberley stories, our traditions, they are not the same as the stories and culture of other indigenous people of Australia."

Torres claims inheritance from three tribal groups of the Broome/ Kimberleys region of north-west Western Australia, the Yawuru, Nyul Nyul and Jabirr Jabirr people. But it wasn't always so. As a young girl Aboriginality wasn't something her people were allowed to take pride in. Her mother and grandmother were taken from their families to be "re-educated" to the white man's way. Early missionaries, as was typical of the time, preached a new doctrine and the cultural practices of the Nyul Nyul people were actually forbidden.

But there were a few renegades, claims Torres who would pass the stories on secretly and the culture stayed underground with the people for a long time.

"But now we need to bring them out in the open again and preserve them for future generations. Our traditional way of life is dying out, stories are no longer handed down round the camp-fires. We need to use more contemporary formats, like books and films and tapes.

I remember hearing some of the stories as a young girl. My Nanna would tell us about the Gumbun, the mangrove man, a strange, hairy little man always on the lookout for children. These stories were designed to keep us close to home. Now, when I tell the stories I like to exaggerate my movements and dramatise them, bring the characters alive for children. When I draw them and write about them in my children's books I use designs specific to the area where I was brought up, I want to recreate some of my cultural inheritance. My books are bilingual because I want people to appreciate that our culture is still a living culture."

Reading Torres' book *Jalygurr; Aussie Animal Rhymes*, is a great start to introducing young children to indigenous culture. It brings alive a Yawuru lifestyle that has existed for many thousands of years. I can almost imagine Torres' Nanna chanting to her children the Gumbun, Mangrove Man poem from the book, *Jalygurr*.

Gumbun Gumbun, Look out, look out It's the Gumbun man Run, run as fast as you can

Similarly I have had fun introducing young children to the concept of left and right with Torres' poem Jiribuga, The Porcupine as we slap first left hand and then right hand on our knees.

Left, right, left right, Walking up the track, Jiribuga the porcupine Never looking back

Torres also reminds us that the oral stories handed down, generation after generation were a way of teaching children about history and their relationship to the land.

People are sceptical, but stories about giant kangaroos were based on fact-25,000 years ago these giant animals over 20 foot high did roam our land. Children learnt through the stories to look for Walga Walga the salmon when the south-easterly winds would blow.

"My people survived in a harsh landscape because they were respectful of it and passed on important survival lessons to their children through the stories."

One thing that comes shining through when talking to Torres is her commitment to her beliefs and the integrity of her work. She will happily share her stories but she demands this same reverence from people who wish to tell the tales.

"It's been hard for my people living through such troubled times but we have adapted and are trying to incorporate all that we have seen and heard from the white man.

It is time that people became aware of the language they use when telling our stories and talking about us. I cannot abide people using the same rehashed old cliches when talking about Aboriginal people; some are intrinsically racist and hurtful to my people.

Stories taken out of context can often inform people incorrectly about various aspects of our culture. European perspective is not the same as Aboriginal perspective, our love of the land and our feeling for the spirit of the land is something hard to explain in words. It must be experienced.

Now it is your turn, there can be no true reconciliation in this great southern land until white people help to right the injustice done to Aboriginal people. We need for you to connect with local indigenous people and hear the stories of your region. Your children need to get a feeling of place by hearing the stories of the land around them. We need to form partnerships and collaborate with each other on stories that educate people about our history and culture.

I feel I am privileged in some ways that I have been able to work with elders of the tribe to save the culture for younger generations. When I worked with Daisy Utemorra on Do Not Go Around The Edges, I felt like a young woman learning from the experience of an older wiser woman. I believe that by educating people about our history and our culture and where we're coming from we gain a greater understanding and awareness of other people's cultures and belief systems-why we do what we do and why we think what we think. This leads, I guess, to a better world."

Anne E Stewart

Available books by Pat Torres: Story of Crow (with Magdalene Williams 1987), Jalygurr: Aussie Animal Rhymes (1987), Do Not Go Around The Edges (Illus. 1991), author Daisy Utemorra). Contact: PO Box 916, Broome, WA.