

Art, literature and stories: exploring sharing across cultures

A conference for teacher-librarians and school leaders
School Library Association of Victoria
in partnership with the National Gallery of Victoria

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Key Note Address: Anne E Stewart

“Not just a clever sharing of mind alone but rather a sharing of heart and spirit.”
Ruth Sawyer. The Way of the Storyteller

Nervous, excited, thrilled and honoured to be here

Today’s address is a combination of my two passions, WORDS and PICTURES and I know I am amongst Kindred Spirits

I’d Like to start with a pray, then a story

(Pretend your sitting on the land) - Actually it’s a nursery rhyme, an action rhyme

Here is the land
Here is the sky
Here are my friends
And here am I

This land, so important to the Wurrundjeri people, the Woi Wurrung and Bunnerong and I acknowledge, the land, its first nations and the storytellers that have gone before me.

Anne E tells Scheherazade from The Great Deeds of Heroic Women by Maurice Saxby and Robert Ingpen (see end of paper for story.)

I first told this story over thirty years ago when I had saris hanging from the ceiling in my bedroom and a harem outfit that I bought in Greville street Prahran, that I rather fancied myself in. I had a romanticised ideal of this legendary Persian queen and storyteller and when I got too big for my britches, which was often, my mum would chide “Who do you think you are Scherherazade?”

Quite frankly “Yes”

But I recently told the story again at the opening of the Persia Love and Devotion exhibition at the State Library of Victoria, (I had convinced them too that I was Scheherazade). It was wonderful to have people from the middle east sitting in the audience nodding their heads in affirmation

But there came a moment in the afternoon’s telling when like an electric jolt I was in the story and I realised that storytelling was sometimes life and death. Now I can’t help but think of a 14 year old girl in a head scarf, on a bus, shot because she tells stories about educating women.

Collecting my thoughts for this key note address I realise I have come along way in my storytelling. Who would have thought that a middle class white girl, educated not more than a few miles from here, who caught the tram along Dandenong road to Presentation Convent Windsor each school day would have the “unmitigated temerity” to think she could teach something about storytelling, indigenous Australia, Asia our neighbours and sustainability

But as aboriginal people have always understood and like healthy ecosystems, where everything is connected, the strands and the paths of MY particular storytelling journey all lead to a unique understanding of the National Curriculum's 3 cross curriculum priority areas, Indigenous Australia, Asia our neighbour and Sustainability

So today you will follow my journey as I came to understandings and suggest ways for us to move forward.

Mine was a cocooned childhood June my mum was devoted to mothering and passionate about nutrition and education, developed in all 5 of her children a love of language, history and culture and my dad Noel, a sportsman, a larrikin, the life of the party but nonetheless conservative shared his gregarious gene with us all.

1975, was a big year for my family, (and Australia it was the year of Gough's dismissal) I was about to sit my matriculation examines and my oldest brother Tony was on his first overseas assignment as a journalist, he was so excited to be heading to Timor
My yearbook reports on the Obituaries page
“our thoughts are with the Stewart family as they await news of Tony missing in Timor” he is brother to Anne Form 6 Blue

But you know the story, he never returned, he was murdered by invading Indonesian army.

A few images stand out from that time, in a radio documentary for ABC 360 series called “Our Tony”, I recall my mother sitting at the table in a little alcove off the Kitchen, like an Alice in wonderland moment she seemed to move off into the distance, a small dark grieving figure, her head hung low in despair
My dad hated us to talk about Tony because it just upset mum.
That proud mother who had so tightly held the reigns of her prancing ponies, who let us each have little head when needed, suddenly dropped the reigns.

In those dark days I started an environmental studies course, partied hard, dropped out and ended up at a party in Torquay.

I was 19 and decided to stay down the coast and headed into Geelong to look for a job (my father aghast at a dropout daughter had enrolled me in a secretarial course) and with these basic skills I got a job as assistant children's librarian at the Geelong library

A stint on the Bellarine Bookmobile meant that when the Jolly Jumbuck storytelling van, an outreach program of the State Library Victoria was in town I accompanied the two performers on the bus to show them where the power points were

They told me if you're traveling with the Jolly Jumbuck you'll have to tell a story

And with the images projected onto the back wall of the bus, I told "The Tiger who came to Tea."

I was on my way.

I stayed there about a year and restless I headed West, then north and saw a fair bit of Australia

But I remember ringing my parents from Weipa, in the Gulf of Carpentaria (oh callow youth, I am ashamed) where I was working in a prawn factory and told them I want to come home and study librarianship in Ballarat.

I started there in 1979. It is here I met one of my role models, Patricia Scott, Dromkeen and AOM winner for her services to storytelling and children's literature, sadly now passed.

I organised a lunchtime storytelling club with Patricia and learnt of the importance of the storytelling triumvirate: the Storyteller, the Story and the audience - they all work together. Like Pat, it was not a theatre training that informed my storytelling but a love of language, literature and a way to share cultural knowledge

I owe her much and over the years when ever I've had a big event an auspicious storytelling moment I'd drop her a line to let he know of her influence.

I delivered the Courtney Oldmeadow oration for Dromkeen in the Windsor Hotel Ballroom around 2005 and talked of Pat. It was a moment of immense pride when Maurice Saxby, doyen of Australian's Children's literature and a friend of Pat's was asked to thank me, he commented, "Pat would be so proud of you", I can hardly mention it without the emotion welling up.

As the years went passed I added to my repertoire and I saw first hand the power of story to engage any audience.

At the completion of my studies I vowed to head somewhere warmer and I remember spotting the advertisement on the back page of the Age employment section "Children's Librarian, Darwin Library."

I knew it was a job for me. I didn't know how life changing it would be.

I had two inspirational women guiding me who encouraged my storytelling efforts, amongst other things, and for the first time I was introduced to Indigenous Australia

Sometimes very confronting for this middleclass white girl, the violence, the dispossession

But on the other hand it opened my eyes to the landscape and the indigenous stories of Australian.

Many aboriginal communities would visit the library when they came to Darwin for an excursion. So I talked and listened and questioned and tried to adapt material to see what worked, what resonated. My string trick about the lizard and the snake became the rainbow snake (Dick Roughesy and Percy Trezice books) and the owl action story became Mook Mook, the Jawoyn name for the big eyed night creature, a nickname that had been given to my niece Esther when her parents worked in Katherine

When we finished with the stories, out came the paper and crayons and children would lie out flat on the library floor and draw. Usually little white children would draw, a house, a tree, the sun but aboriginal children would draw landscapes, but interestingly, always a birds eye view, a topographical map of the land.

Well I never knew people could have that ability.

Where the stories I knew had a beginning a middle and an end, I learnt that aboriginal stories segue in and out of events , locations, relationships, rituals, teaching and survival information. Aboriginal people have lived here for over sixty thousand years, treating the land with great respect and reverence, their stories of the dreaming incorporate a sophisticated understanding of ecology and shared commonality of all species of living creatures.

Their degrees of kinship and relationships to the land are extremely complex built up over thousands and thousands of years living harmoniously with their environment.

I realised I had much to learn and understand. I kept looking, asking questions, reading widely

David Suzuki in his book Wisdom of the Elders details this complex understanding by referring to Arande's (Central Australia) Red Kangaroo Dreaming stories. He refers to respected biologist, and renowned authority on the natural history and ecology of the red kangaroo A. E. Newsome when he writes in a research paper about 'eco-mythology.' Newsome claims that stories about Red Kangaroo Dreaming and the sacred spring at Krantji, 'may have an underlying ecological rationale.'

'A map of the ancestors overland trek near Krantji ---- breathing life and form into the landscape as they went corresponded with uncanny precision to maps of preferred habitats of red kangaroo.'

'The ancient Aborigines who created these legends must have been well acquainted with the ecology of the red kangaroo, and appear to have passed that knowledge into the mythology to be hidden by allegory.'

Whilst Children's Librarian and in subsequent storytelling tours I travelled to the most amazing and beautiful places in the territory and I started to feel the sacredness of land, a gorge, a waterfall, a sheltered creek bank, sheer cliff faces that reached to the sky and I now felt they demanded as much respect as the mightiest of cathedrals

Like the Celts with stories of the landscape, every crossroad and river imbued with a story, the seasons, a mighty tree , I came to understand that songlines of stories already traversed our wind brown land

Joseph Campbell the great mythologist says that, "Myths and legends..... are like shards of pottery in an archeological dig, frameworks for our life's".

I started to recognise this intricate indigenous framework and I knew I would only ever be able to dip my toes into this vast ocean of knowledge.

But as a storyteller I wanted to share some of these stories.

As I wrote in a paper presented at the Melbourne Museum for IMTAL (International Museums Theatre alliance) I thought if indigenous students were "Given Wings" to fly as

Maurice Saxby's calls teaching children to read, they needed to hear their own stories, see their own faces so I looked at protocols for sharing indigenous material

ALIA, the Australian Libraries and Information Association was a great source of information and I started to paraphrase my own understandings.

Always acknowledge country, what place names locally are indigenous
Where does your story come from?

These days there is a wealth of indigenous material to share. Indij readers
Like a traditional path to literacy, start with the nursery rhymes, the folktales
Stories of flora and fauna and food.

Do you know the names and stories of any indigenous leaders, heroes- role models,
For me William Barak, Johnny Mullagh and Merin Merin from my version of the Lost
Children of Daylesford are part of the repertoire

When I learnt to read, the Victorian readers were all the rage but we have moved on from
calling aboriginal people merely black trackers or servants
Sing their names out , put their voices on the landscape

Indigenous people are proud of their clans and their stories are particular to different
places
Where are your nearest story keepers?
What stories do they have to tell.?

Gularwuy Yunupingu, explains '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.'
As I storyteller I accept that, it is the way it has always been. I've always known some
stories are sacred or some are private, personal.

I also acknowledge that I don't have artistic rights to indigenous stories, that would have
to be sought. I always ask permission if my story is to be recorded in any way.

Dovie Thompson, a storyteller from the Kiowa Apache and Lakota people has done a lot
of work on Cultural Appropriation and explains .

"For decades, the global storytelling community has struggled to examine the ethics of
telling stories from other cultures. Who "owns" the stories? How do we respect our
colleagues, their work and their cultures? How do we find our own stories and authentic
voice?

From Dovie we hear a first nations perspective. We must have 'respectful, provocative
and open-ended conversation'.....go beyond the three R's of Reading, Remembering,
and Recitation to a view that Dovie calls her Four R's: "Respect, Research, Responsibility
and Restraint".

In 2000 my sharing of indigenous culture became even more personal, when Aretha
Eileen Anne Stewart was born. Her mum Donna Brown is from the Gambangirri People

from around Nambucca Heads and her Dad, my brother Paul Stewart, well I always say we hail from Elwood, St Kilda.

I had the great honour of driving Aretha home from hospital, along the Wurrundjeri Way, past Bunjil the eagle and over the West Gate Bridge to Newport. Aretha has given me even more reason to honour the stories of this land, foster learning through meaningful educational experiences. It made me even more resolute. I think there is something in my Celtic Heart that yearns for the spirits of place and this morning arriving by train, passing Bundjil the eagle, as always I figuratively genuflect or make the sign of the cross.

There's something that Bruce Pascoe said on the opening night of the SBS series the First Australians that has stuck with me, "It's the longest-living civilisation on Earth,.....Said Bruce, a member of the Boonwurrung clan,..... "And if you can't learn something from a people that successful, then you're defying your own intelligence."

I've known of Bruce's work a long time and a few years back I asked him to be part of a podcast I created for ABC Ballarat, it was a literary walk around the town. Bruce's Book *Convincing Ground: Learning to fall in love with your country* had many important things to say but I talked to him about his writings on Eureka and the flag when we stopped on the tour outside where it hung in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. I quote his snippet about Aboriginal stories and lore

"The Southern Cross Constellation is meant to represent the unique Australian identity but for at least 60,000 years it represented the Bram bram bult brothers throwing spears at the giant emu, Tchingal, who killed the creator spirit Waang. Each star in the Constellation represents either protagonists in the battle or the spears they threw. Sadly if that were a Tibetan or Balinese story Australians would have carvings of deities on their coffee tables or key rings. Our confusion, our inability to frankly examine the past, leads us to look to other countries for history and culture and quite often for spiritualism. Mired in the muddle we often seem confounded by what is happening in our country".

I remember one day, sitting in a school staffroom between sessions when a teacher wandered in and we started to chat. He was a refugee from WW2 and he talked with passion about the indigenous spirit of Australia. He said, not long in to the conversation, "I reckon all Australian children should be given a totem animal when they are born, to connect them to the environmentso they become more aware of looking after it". There seemed to be some merit in that.

I want to hear the aboriginal stories of the stars, myths and legends of the plants, stories that help us care for our environment. Australians need the stories that inform this landscape. We need to respectfully work with aboriginal people to bring them to life for all Australians

That is our challenge.

It was serendipitous how I came to look at Asian Stories, I think it was studying on the goldfields of Ballarat where I learnt that thousands of Chinese arrived here in the 1850's also looking for gold. Through literary trails I knew that Norman Lindsay and his brothers wagged school in Creswick's Chinatown. I haven't read the white paper on Asian studies but I figured the same logic for the number of children of Chinese Heritage that I was

telling to in schools in inner city Melbourne. If they could hear their stories, see their faces they might take more interest

I consciously sort out stories, picture books to learn to tell

The Dragon's Pearl by Julie Lawson is indeed a jewel to share and always a crowd favourite no matter what age group. I looked further afield, once again I tried to personalise the stories so an old Chinese herbalist, Jimmy Lee became a hero of the Eureka Ghost story I wrote. I am sure I have seen Chinese kids raise their heads just a little higher when I explain how clever this old Chinese man was and how he helped young lovers escape from the redcoats. Another ABC story tells of the Yip brothers and the depression one suffered here on the goldfields.

When I learnt Junko Morimoto's Japanese story of the white crane I never knew what a cultural bridge it would build until I was asked to lead a funeral service for a local young mum who had tragically died of cancer, there were daffodils and folded paper cranes everywhere, her husband was from Japan and her children were so young.

It may have been bold of me but I first informed the children of a local cultural belief of our Dja Dja Wurrung people and that is the souls of our ancestors live in the birds. That is, I told them when somebody dies their spirit goes into the birds.

Then with my one origami trick, I folded the bird as I told the story

At the end, when the bird flies off calling

"Please do not forget me" I hoped that Australian and Japanese beliefs were intertwined

Another story I discovered at the National Museum of Australia, was that of Mei Quong Tart. Arrived with his uncle from Canton aged nine, who learnt to speak English with a Scottish accent and counted as his heroes Robbie Burns and Confucius.

The Benevolence of the Chinese always astounded me.

These were the stories that started to appeal, the cross over stories where cultures were layered together. The achievements and contributions of our diverse population. We need to be telling these stories to engage children with Asia

It wasn't until about 1992 when Michelle Turner published her book Telling East Timor that I first read the creation story "How Timor came from the Crocodile"

It was added to my repertoire and I remember in the early 1990's telling the story at Lalor North Secondary College not long after the massacre at Santa Cruz when political refugees were arriving in Australia from East Timor

Three students, year 7's waited till all had left the library and came over to tell me they were from East Timor. Maybe I made them feel a little bit welcome. That has happened a number of times over the years, East Timorese admitting this was the first time they'd heard the story.

It is bitterly ironic, now when I tell the story, I first hold up the flag of East Timor and ask students do they know where it is from?

Rarely does anyone know, which always reminds me of the naivety of my brother and his colleagues. They thought the Australian flag would offer them protection. In the back blocks of East Timor they thought someone would recognise our flag

There's an old saying 'you never know someone until you walk a mile in their shoes. Your selection of material, the stories you share should be painting pictures of diverse cultures and wisdoms. Do heroes always have to be white sportsmen here in Australia?

The 398 section of the library has always been my favourite section of the library, is yours stocked to reflect the cultural mix of your students and the National Curriculum's focus on Asia.

Do you have hero stories, role models from Asian Countries?

Being a storyteller, I say the more festivals the better. Nowruz, Iranian new year is the latest I've added after being part of the Persia Love and Devotion exhibition.

When it comes to Sustainability, once again I carry a few credentials.

My father was an early environmental consultant, a recycler in fact.

Well he was a bottle-o

There's a long story to that path but he raised five kids, by managing bottle-yards in Heidelberg, Eltham, Abbotsford and St Kilda recycling beer bottles for Carlton United Breweries

He went on to start ROA recyclers of Australia and join with Visy to look after the waste industries.

My partner Rod May is an organic farmer and he and his family have been living and farming sustainably for over thirty years on a property that has been in the family for a hundred years.

My sister, the youngest of the Stewart 5 ended up working with dad for a while and met a chap who'd created CD rom of Ollie recycles that was sort of a game teaching people the three R's of reduce, reuse, recycle.

Jane bought it and developed it and this program became the standard in classrooms across Australia, the United Kingdom, California and the United Arab Emirates

Jane is a leader in sustainability education and training and a strategic thinker in the area of Corporate Social Responsibility.

She has worked with government, industry and community organisations around the world to develop state of the art programs that educate different sectors of the community about their place in the natural world.

Jane and I find ourselves coming at it from different angles but both of us believe that sustainability is a state of mind and a way of life.

Incorporating sustainability principles, concepts and approaches in both formal and informal education and training is the best way to internalise these concepts and encourage their widespread adoption.

Jane has been working with Landcare for a while now and told of a recent conference she attended where David Suzuki spoke about his book Legacy. He was followed by Uncle

Ron Archer a Djungan elder from the Northern Gulf Indigenous Savannah group in Queensland. His aboriginal name is Jun-ju-lud, which means 'small bird'

It was his story, rather than Suziki's she so distinctly remembered

There is a transcript on the landcare page but what Jane was so impressed with was the way he taught his young grandson and immersed him in the culture of the land and how everything is connected

I want to paraphrase a little of the story for you

His young grandson was pestering him about where the rain came from

Uncle Ron explained When that rain come, that tree will grow.

"And when that tree will grow," I said, "That flower gonna come on that tree." "All right."

And I said, "When that flower come on that tree, "that little bee gonna come along, "grab that honey from that little tree, take it to his tree" "and then we gonna over there and cut his tree down "and take his honey from him." He said, "That's where the honey come from." I said, "He come from that flower." And I said, "But if that flower don't grow, honey don't come." And while we sitting down doing this, our property is in a big basin, we're surrounded by hills and there was a shower coming over the hill, and it's coming our way and I said, "Eh, boy," I said, "You want a rain to come." He said, "Yeah." So I grabbed two spanner and I sitting there... (CHANTS) So he grabbed two spanner and he start corroboree-ing. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

And he gone round in front of me while I'm singing. He gone like... "Arr, arr, arr..." (WHOOOPS) Then he look at that rain... "Arr, arr, arr..." (LAUGHS) Rain came. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

All right? The rain came. And he couldn't wait to tell his grandmother, "Grandmother, I made a rain come. "That rain you come up on that hill, I made that rain come."

So if I don't change that little guy's thinking, he will always believe from that day till when he's old man like me, he'll know that his culture made that rain come. So when I think of my young grandchildren, in his mind, he made that rain come. You can go and tell him all the scientific information you want, but in his little brainbox, he know that he made that rain because his grandfather sang the song.

I don't think I could do justice to telling any more of Uncle Ron's story but is the principles behind his telling that see me on a quest for stories that illustrate, illuminate and become an intrinsic part of living on this earth.

If we look to the National Curriculum guidelines for Sustainability and paraphrase their writings and condense the principles it all comes down

Healthy ecosystems - What material do you have to describe where you live?
What are the ecosystems around you. How are things connected?

World Views- we need to talk of diversity & social /justice. Do you share stories about other cultures, other peoples?

Interdependence- Like the rain and the flower and the honey bee are connected what stories do you tell to show everything is connected?

In the Future-individual community action will play a big part in adapting to our changed life. Are you involved in local action?

Local and global equity and fairness across generations into the future.
What are you doing for future generations

I'd like to finish by referring you to a most remarkable women and tell a small fable she often told. Wangari Maathi started the Greenbelt movement, a plan to reforest Kenya, provide jobs for women and stop damaging erosion. She paid women a small sum to plant the trees--and eventually, caused 30 million trees to be planted, helping 900,000 women.

She was awarded the noble peace prize in 2004 for her work with the green belt movement and sadly died in September 2011

Check out the clip of her telling the humming bird story, it goes like this

The story of the hummingbird is about
this huge forest being consumed by a fire.
All the animals in the forest come out
and they are transfixed
as they watch the forest burning,
and they feel to be awkward
they are powerless
except this little humming bird, it says
I am going to do something about the fire.
so it flies to the nearest stream
takes some drop water, and puts it on the fire
and goes up and down, up and down,
as fast as it can
In the mean time, all the other animals,
much bigger animals, like the elephants,
with big trunk, could bring much more water,
they are standing there helpless,
and they are saying to the humming bird:
What do you think you can do ?
Your are too little ! This fire is too big !
Your wings are too little, and your beak is so small,
only can bring a small drop of water at a time !
But as they continue to discourage it
it turns to them without wasting any time,
and tells them:
I am doing the best I can.

And that to me is what all of us should do, said Wangarri
we should always be like the hummingbird.

I may feel insignificant,

but I certainly don't want to be
like the animals watching
as the planet goes down the drain.
I will be a humming bird.
I will do the best I can.

I call on you all to be like the hummingbird.

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