

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## ***Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* eds. Anita Heiss and Peter Minter (Allen & Unwin, 2008)**

International PEN is an indispensable, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the freedom of the written word. Right now, somewhere in the world, there is a writer facing imprisonment or death because of a book, an article, a blog, even. And right now, somewhere in the world, there is a member of PEN writing a letter to free that writer. PEN stands up for the voices being silenced, and this is why it is so appropriate that the Sydney Centre of International PEN, through the Centre for the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature, has put together the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*. Because Allen & Unwin have published the anthology and it therefore has the capacity to be widely distributed around the nation, excuses for why we are not hearing the Aboriginal voice will not hold. The book is a huge accomplishment and a credit to the editors, Dr Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, as well as to General Editor Nicholas Jose. It is a gift to Australian literature, a massively important text which gives new insights into our history and gives thunderous voice to our often ignored, frequently silenced, natural custodians of the land.

The book is chronologically organised, creating a timeline of Indigenous culture and politics. Beginning with a personal letter from Bennelong to Mr Philips, Lord Sydney's Steward, requesting stockings, handkerchiefs and shoes, and ending with an excerpt from Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air*, there is an obvious written evolution at work. Broken English works its way into a 'proper' English, and is then consciously, politically, turned back into a broken English again, only to become a shared Australian English. Though the vernacular changes with the time and the form of the writing changes, too, as Aboriginals begin to forge a path for themselves in the dominantly white society (letters, articles, speeches, petitions, poems, stories, songs, plays, memoirs, novels, essays), the backbone of the writing remains politically charged.

Positioned before the text (often excerpted from a larger work), is the author's biography. Short in length but extensive in content, we see the writers represented in this anthology wear many hats. They are board members, they form committees, preside as chairs and organise events – major historical events. They fight for protection against their 'protectors', freedom from the Protection Agencies, for land, for referendums, for treaties, reconciliation, deaths in prison and for the longevity of their culture. Names like David Unaipon, Oodgeroo Noonucle, Vincent Lingiari and Patrick Dodson are among these peaceful warriors. But most of their names are not well known to the average Australian, even if their bios are thick with a lifetime of activism. Like boomerang craftsman Joe Timbery, or journalist John Newfong, or filmmaker Marcia Langton. The earliest authors are represented by people living on missions, writing letters of complaint about unfair treatment. These resonate strongest. They are also represented by ministers, sheep hands, academics, artists, railway workers and solicitors. But it is the role of writer/activist that is most important and, indeed, all the roles work together in creating this Aboriginal Voice. I quote from Jack Davis' 'First Born':

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Where are my first-born, said the brown land, sighing;  
They came out of my womb long, long ago.  
They were formed of my dust—why, why are they crying  
And the light of their being barely aglow? (p.5)

Whether the words are written as a lament, as in the poem above, or as a call to action, or as a retelling of a dreamtime story or a family's personal story, there is a lesson to be learned: we (forgive me for the sweeping, general statement here, counting all readers among White Australia) have burdened our Indigenous brothers and sisters for far too long and can no longer tolerate injustice. If you leave this book feeling any other way, then open it up again. Read it again.

This isn't a book you devour. It is a long time coming. It deserves to be read in multiple sittings. Ultimately it should be a fixture on the bedside table, so that it is in easy reach when you are in the mood for something political, or impassioned, when you desire introspection, or a new kind of knowledge on a very old theme. But don't let me highlight only the ardent politics of the book or the importance of its cultural imprint. This is also quality reading from a level of pure entertainment. Bruce Pascoe's 'The Slaughters of the Bulumwaal Butcher' and Kevin Gilbert's 'The Cherry Pickers' come to mind. And wouldn't we all love to own a book where we can open to page 144 and read the lyrics to Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody's 'From Little Things Big Things Grow'? Because it is enduring words like the lyrics to that song that we need now and again to remind us that we can all be in this together. We can make changes, for the better of us all. This anthology is a step in that very direction. How remiss of us if we let a new generation of Australians grow into adults without knowing the power, the pride and persistence of the Aboriginal Race. This should be required reading for every Australian secondary student.

**Heather Taylor Johnson**