



## Reviews



### **Embedding Indigenous Perspectives in Reviewing** ***Welcome to Country* with Australian High-School Students:** **More Than a Book Review**

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Murphy, Aunty Joy. *Welcome to Country*, illustrated by Lisa Kennedy, Black Dog Books, 2016, 32 pp. \$24.99 pb.  
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#### **Part 1: Introduction**

##### **Embedding Indigenous Perspectives in a Book Review**

The writing of this book review and the unusual form it ultimately took came about because of a variety

of fortuitous coincidences. To begin with, I was asked if I was interested in writing a review of Indigenous children's literature for this journal. I was interested, but as a non-Indigenous woman, I felt it would be a

better, more accurate review if written by an Indigenous reviewer, so I gave the editors some potential names. The same week, the Ashgrove Children's Literature Festival in Brisbane, Australia, contacted me and asked if I would like to run a workshop at a private secondary school during Literature Week. I have been involved for some time in the work of embedding Indigenous perspectives in curricula, so an opportunity to apply them to an "authentic" school-based workshop as part of a literary festival seemed too good an opportunity to forgo. The third coincidence: I was getting to know Chenoa Masters, an impressive young Indigenous pre-service teacher. And so this project came together. Chenoa and I decided that we would lead the workshop and review a new Indigenous-authored picture book, Aunty Joy Murphy and Lisa Kennedy's *Welcome to Country*, together with the high-school students who took part in the workshop. In the process, we would all engage in what we expected would be an *authentic* book-reviewing workshop (authentic because it was to be published), with a genuine reason to embed Indigenous perspectives.

According to the database AustLit, over 829 children's books have been published in 2016 by or with Indigenous Australian authors or illustrators.<sup>1</sup> This in itself is a powerful speaking-back to years of colonial history in which non-Indigenous writers produced stories about Indigenous people (Bradford 335). But a book and its reception are about more than the will of the author. As Sandra Phillips reminds us, book

publishing has also been dominated by White publishers and editors, so "Indigenous publishers deserve closer attention because like the independent Australian publishers of the 1960s and 1970s, they have led the way in introducing new Indigenous forms and stories to Australian and international markets and audiences" (102). If the book publishers, editors, marketing people, and reviewers are non-Indigenous, then their roles as knowledge-makers need to be considered as well.

Writing a book review is no more culturally neutral than any other act (Moreton-Robinson 246). However, while there is a plethora of scholarship on the history and significance of Indigenous people telling their own stories (Heiss 198), little has been written about who reviews these stories. Book reviews can be seen as a particular vehicle of dominance and control, wherein, for instance, a White reviewer has the power to "critique" the Indigenous voice, even if the reviewer lacks the knowledge (and certainly the standpoint) to fully understand it. Writing about White editors rather than reviewers, Freeman asks interesting questions: how may we provide "advice that will genuinely assist our Indigenous countrywomen and men to 'become the gatekeepers' of their own stories, identities and histories? What constitutes an ethical approach to [reviewing] Indigenous writing?" (134). To many non-Indigenous people, knowing how to *read* an Indigenous text "may appear to be a daunting and intimidating task" (Freeman 135).

In the school context, the long, patient project of embedding Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum has made some inroads, though surely not enough (Price 151). The call to include Indigenous content across the Australian curriculum began a long time ago. Today, it is becoming more common for aspects of Indigenous history and Indigenous authors to be included in the Australian school repertoire, but despite the National Curriculum, the way such material is included is still largely ad hoc. Officially, the teaching of “Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander histories and cultures” (Australian Curriculum) is a cross-curriculum priority. The aim that students “gain a deeper understanding and appreciation” of these “histories and cultures, deep knowledge traditions and holistic world views” (Australian Curriculum) requires of the non-Indigenous teacher not just a commitment to the task, but a significant level of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history as well as an understanding of where this knowledge comes from, and how his or her own non-Indigenous cultural identity affects these understandings. Chenoa and I saw in this project an opportunity to collaborate in exploring new ways of embedding Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum that would be beneficial for the participating students and for us as researchers and teachers.

The students and I, all of whom are non-Indigenous, could not have written this review without Chenoa.

Chenoa’s reflections on her contributions to the process are incorporated into both this introduction and the review. She had final approval over the review and, because her Indigenous knowledge was crucial for us to review the book, her name comes first as author of this review article.

### **Workshop and Review Design**

Initially, Chenoa and I met with the eight participating high-school students for an hour and a half at the school as part of Literature Week. Chenoa read the book aloud to the students while we all looked at the illustrations. She began with background information: an explanation of what a “welcome to country” is and a discussion of traditional culture and creation stories (to explain, for instance, the symbol of the serpent in most of the illustrations, to discuss some aspects of colonization, and to try to explain Indigenous peoples’ relationships to nature and the natural world). Chenoa’s contribution enriched the discussion and made it possible for this review to be written. We all stopped her at various points, asking questions, such as: “The author’s name is Aunty Joy. If I met her would I be able to call her that or would I need to earn that privilege?” Chenoa is not from the same language group as Aunty Joy Murphy, which led to a discussion of how many Indigenous language groups there are. Chenoa explained that she did not know Woiwurrung Ngulu, the Indigenous language

in the text (the text is also presented in English). Rich discussion ensued while the students worked out what to say about each page, how to interpret symbols, and how to understand the tone of the book. The book is written in the second person, giving the impression that it is meant to be a teaching tool: the holders of the knowledge can explain it in simple terms for those of us with little knowledge, thereby welcoming us into the story.

With Chenoa's guidance, we modelled aspects of "yarning" into our conversation with the girls. Yarning or yarning circles are perceived as common to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and to First Nations communities in Canada for establishing a "sense of place" through informal conversation (Scott and Robinson 1). We agreed with Cheree Dean's definition of yarning:

The strength of yarning is its flexibility and adaptation to the individual needs of Aboriginal research. It allows the participants, the intended beneficiaries, to become partners within the research process, not just individual contributors. This means that the research purpose, local expectations and roles can be negotiated in a collegial and holistic manner during yarning sessions. Participants then become fundamental contributors to research decision making as well as fundamental contributors of information (7).

In the workshop, our yarning was not simply another way of saying we would have an informal discussion; we tried to model the principles of yarning, both in the way we engaged in dialogue during the workshop and in how we collaborated to write this final review. We organized the workshop as a collaborative, informal, meandering conversation where, sitting in a circle, we could all share ideas and stories about everything from our own families and communities to our cultural identities and our responses to the picture book (also sometimes wandering to the topic of racism). Much of our time was spent building rapport and sharing a connection, and moving freely between telling our own stories and focusing on the picture book. While this informal conversation was unusual in the school setting, it modelled some of the elements of yarning discussed by Bessarab and Ng'andu. This process was successful in the experience with the high school students.

Chenoa was satisfied that "[i]n this yarning time, the girls were extremely respectful toward the Indigenous culture; all questions were asked with a curiosity to learn more. During our time together, this group of girls looked deeper into the meaning behind the words and illustrations of this book."

After the workshop, we divided the eight girls into four pairs and gave each pair a section of the review to write over several weeks. The text that follows is the students' amalgamated review, with Chenoa's introductory and concluding paragraphs. Other than

very minor copy editing, we have not made any changes to the girls' texts.

## Part 2: Review of *Welcome to Country*

Welcome to Country is a tradition as old as our people, carried out by a traditional custodian or elder from the land on which we meet. A Welcome occurs as a response to seeking permission to come onto another's land. Due to this cultural tradition of seeking permission to enter the territory, we remove the chances of misunderstandings between groups, by respecting each other and each other's spaces. Through Welcome, our people are asking of you to respect our land as we do.  
—Chenoa Masters

*Welcome to Country* is a picture book written by respected Australian Aboriginal Elder Aunty Joy Murphy and illustrated by Indigenous artist Lisa Kennedy. The book is a welcome to country from the Wurundjeri people, the traditional custodians of the lands extending north from Melbourne city past the Great Dividing Range, east to Mount Baw Baw, and south to the Werribee River mouth (Wurundjeri Tribe Land Compensation and Cultural Heritage Council). Traditional welcoming ceremonies would take place in person with an elder

or community spokesperson (Queensland University of Technology). The publishing of this book allows the Wurundjeri People to reach out to all people and welcome outsiders to their land, culture, and traditions.

The book begins and ends with the same welcome to country, in both English and the language of the Wurundjeri people, Woiwurrung Ngulu. The use of Woiwurrung Ngulu informs the reader that this book comes from that culture; this would likely appeal to readers, including older readers, who wish to learn about the Wurundjeri people.

*Welcome to Country* hosts a collection of rich illustrations that depict the story, culture, and traditions of the Wurundjeri people. The illustrations provide a dramatic contrast with the simple yet meaningful text—for example, the landscapes are highly detailed. The people are drawn symbolically to represent the tribe's ancestors. Their eyes are often closed, and they appear to be sleeping/dreaming, which links to the Aboriginal understanding of the world's creation, the Dreamtime. Kennedy has used a variety of organic yet vibrant colours to express the story told through the illustrations. The book also features on almost every page a continuous illustration of a river, while the background and people change around it. The illustrations in *Welcome to Country* make the book highly effective in conveying and emphasizing the rich culture and traditions of the Wurundjeri people and the ongoing presence of the natural, flowing river (see fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** Text © 2016 Joy Murphy  
Illustrations © 2016 Lisa Kennedy  
From WELCOME TO COUNTRY  
Reproduced by permission of Walker Books Australia

The text that accompanies the illustrations reinforces the messages of the artwork, emphasizing the sharing of culture, creation, and stories. Several themes run through the book, such as the Wurundjeri people's ancestral history and the spirits of their ancestors who have left their mark on the land. To accompany and echo these themes, the illustrations consistently depict people from the Wurundjeri tribe, a starry night sky, and natural flora and fauna from the land, such as the grub from the River White Gum. Another recurring theme is that of the river: it flows through most of the pages and connects the text and illustrations together.

*Welcome to Country* is not a typical children's book because there are no set characters or storyline. Instead, the aesthetically pleasing artwork carries the words and meanings throughout the book with minimal words on each page.

Many references are made to the Wurundjeri People's creation story. Creation stories are very important to Aboriginal cultures: they explain how the world came into being during the Dreamtime and encourage respect and proper nurturing of the land. One of the most famous of these stories features the rainbow serpent. It says that the land started out flat and bare before the serpent began shaping it and bringing to it colour and life (Australian Government). In the Wurundjeri tribe's creation story, it is Bunjil the eagle who plays the role of the rainbow serpent: as the creator spirit, *Welcome to Country* tells us, Bunjil made "man,

woman and child from the land." The Wurundjeri story also provides insight into the Aboriginal cultural belief about being part of the land and only taking from it what can be given back. This is so often forgotten in modern times as humans mindlessly use natural resources, never giving the land a chance to rest and replenish so that it can remain productive into the future. Dreamtime stories and beliefs are central to Aboriginal communities. The reference to these stories in the book is clearly an invitation to non-Indigenous readers to connect with Indigenous life and culture.

As a teaching resource, *Welcome to Country* is highly valuable in that it feeds into the ongoing process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia. Through simple text and colourful, rich images, Murphy and Kennedy successfully communicate to the target audience of primary-school children, in addition to older readers, a message regarding the significance of Indigenous culture and Indigenous Australians, specifically the Wurundjeri people, and their relationship with their land. Books such as this one are especially important and valuable as non-Indigenous Australians work toward reconciliation with Indigenous people. This teaching resource is highly instructive for young non-Indigenous Australians in particular as they develop an understanding of Indigenous culture. It fosters positive connotations surrounding Indigenous values and beliefs and further expands readers' understanding of

cultural customs, which may differ from their own. A completely new world is opened up to both young and older readers through *Welcome to Country*. It could prove to be the foundation for further Australian history study and, in a country where racism, segregation, and discrimination are still prevalent, it could encourage readers to develop independent views and ideas regarding past and current injustices inflicted on Indigenous Australians. Even though the book is aimed at young people, *Welcome to Country* could easily be successful in conveying aspects of Indigenous culture to older readers, who may have been exposed only to negative or one-sided opinions of Indigenous Australians during their own education. Overall, Murphy and Kennedy should be congratulated for producing such a simple yet valuable picture book: it is full of hidden depth and meaning that would be very useful as an Indigenous reconciliation teaching resource.

Being a young Indigenous woman, having the opportunity to share my culture with the next generation is a privilege. As a pre-service teacher, I understand that embedding Indigenous perspectives into every classroom can sometimes be a challenge. I believe that further embedding an understanding of the Indigenous perspectives into the non-Indigenous Australian culture starts with the education system. The first step is through activities such as having the opportunity to sit down in a yarning circle. Books such as *Welcome to Country* provide readers of all ages, starting with children, a basic understanding of the world's longest living culture. By implementing activities such as this book review in the education system early, we can set up a foundation of knowledge for the Australian culture so that deeper understandings can continue to be built.  
—Chenoa Masters

## Notes

An excellent set of teacher notes is available for use with the book at <[classroom.walkerbooks.com.au/welcome/pdf/WTC\\_Teacher-Notes\\_web.pdf](http://classroom.walkerbooks.com.au/welcome/pdf/WTC_Teacher-Notes_web.pdf)>.

<sup>1</sup> This very large number likely includes student-made books, used in classrooms.



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