

What do Aboriginal Storytellers bring to Crime Fiction?

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2016

Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree, except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance and advice of my Principal Supervisor, Professor Anne Cranny-Francis. I also acknowledge the early contribution to this project of my former Secondary Supervisor, Professor Juanita Sherwood.

I thank my partner, Russell, for his enduring love and encouragement. I would also like to thank Mum, Dad and Samuel Wagan Watson for their unceasing belief in me. I am grateful to my cousins, aunts and uncles for the wealth of stories that were instilled in me during my childhood. Finally, I extend my gratitude to the indomitable, wise and humorous matriarchs who live in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.

Abstract

English literacy was imposed upon Aboriginal people by the settlers in the exercise of their superior power, in an attempt to 'civilise' and assimilate Aboriginal people. But such was the foresight and resourcefulness of early Aboriginal writers, that they transformed the written word into a medium through which they spoke truth to power. In the ensuing centuries Aboriginal people transformed the written word by imbuing the page with their worldviews, experiential knowledge and politics. This doctor of creative arts thesis examines how contemporary Aboriginal writers are drawing upon their unique literary heritage in order to re-create crime fiction.

Aboriginal crime writers are transforming the genre through two tropes – reclaiming Country and characters who bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative. In Aboriginal crime fiction, the land is a character that has agency in the story and wears the wounds of its people. In spite of colonisation, the bonds between the protagonist and the land remain strong. The latter trope resounds in characters that privilege Aboriginal histories, worldviews and celebrate the resilience of black communities.

Both tropes find reflection in the novel that forms part of this doctor of creative arts thesis, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*. The novel revolves around the journey of Aunty June Clarkson, a Murri Aunty who becomes a private detective. Aunty June draws upon her culture, experiential knowledge, wit and steely determination in order to solve crime. The Murri grapevine is one of her many tools, as is her invisibility as an Aboriginal woman. It is from behind the masks of demeaning stereotypes that Aunty June finds clues, pursues witnesses and delivers justice to villains.

Preface

The origins of this doctor of creative arts thesis lie in my fond memories of the Murri aunties of my childhood. My aunties were wise beyond measure, natural comedians and on occasion, they could become vociferous critics. They were also gifted politicians who wielded exceptional power, not only in our family but also in the broader Aboriginal community of south-east Queensland. As I grew older I became aware that such women did not exist in Australian literature, and it dawned on me that each one of us was poorer for their absence. In 2012 I decided to celebrate those brilliant women by writing a crime novel about a Murri aunty who becomes a private detective. I was so passionate about the concept that I decided to make it the subject of my doctor of creative arts project.

Writing the novel, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*, proved to be challenging. Although I could visualise the protagonist, Aunty June Clarkson, and I could hear her voice when I closed my eyes, I could not get inside her head. Then I remembered that my aunties were very private women, and even though there was great love between us, I knew little about their intimate lives. In order to find my way into Aunty June's head, I had to discover her through characters who I already knew; her niece, Freya Clarkson, and Freya's best friend, Mark Tonkin. Hence, the novel, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*, is largely written in the voices of Freya and Mark, before the final third of the story is told by Aunty June Clarkson.

The exegesis was an opportunity for me to rediscover my passion for the Aboriginal literary tradition, and the extraordinary stories that have lined its trajectory. English literacy was imposed by the settlers in the exercise of their superior power, in an attempt to 'civilise' our people. But such was the foresight and resourcefulness of our old people, that they used the written word as a tool through which they spoke truth to power. Our ancestors also transformed the written word by imbuing the page with Aboriginal worldviews, experiential knowledge and politics. When Aboriginal writers turn to crime fiction, we draw upon this

unique literary tradition. The historical roots of Aboriginal crime fiction are discussed in chapter one of the exegesis.

Aboriginal crime writers are transforming the genre through the tropes of reclaiming Country and characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative. The former is manifest in the themes of inter-relatedness, the return to country and challenging psychological terra nullius. Those themes will be examined in chapter two of the exegesis. The latter trope finds reflection in protagonists who privilege Aboriginal histories and values. They also understand that racism is not confined to the arbitrary behaviour of flawed individuals. Rather, it is systemic and consequently, racism remains the daily experience for many of our people. The trope of characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative will be explored in chapter three of the exegesis.

Both tropes find reflection in the novel, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*. The protagonist, Aunty June Clarkson, is proud of being a Mununjali woman from Beaudesert in Queensland. In common with many of her contemporaries in the Aboriginal community, Aunty June has fond memories of our civil rights movement. Mirroring my own aunties, she is gregarious and doesn't suffer fools lightly. Aunty June is also conscious of systemic racism, just as she is aware of her invisibility as a black woman. But she is never a victim. Aunty June challenges demeaning stereotypes, and on occasion, she uses them in order to hide her detective work.

This project has been difficult and it has taken many hours away from my loved ones. But it has also revived my passion for Aboriginal storytelling. I hope that you, dear reader, are similarly inspired by the deadly Aunty June Clarkson.

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Sydney

October 2016.