

**Victoria University**

**Anneli Knight**

**Creating Indigenous characters that ring true—and not ‘blowing a foot off’**

Abstract:

This paper engages with the debate about whether non-Indigenous writers have the right to create Indigenous characters in their fiction. Based on a series of interviews with selected Australian authors who have published novels with Indigenous themes, the paper argues it is important non-Indigenous writers are not deterred from writing Indigenous characters. Instead, writers are urged to engage with the discussion and develop an appreciation of its context and sensitivity. Non-Indigenous writers are encouraged to proceed through a process of detailed research and empathetic writing to create Indigenous characters that ring true.

Biographical note:

Anneli Knight is a creative writing PhD student at Victoria University. Her thesis novel is set in a fictional Aboriginal community in the Kimberley, in Australia’s north-west where she has spent much of her time over the past six years.

Keywords:

Indigenous—Worldview—Boundaries

Over the past two decades the representation of Indigenous people in fiction created by non-Indigenous writers has come under intensified scrutiny, bringing vigorous debate to the discussion over the place non-Indigenous writers might have in creating Indigenous characters—with some commentators proposing non-Indigenous writers should avoid creating Indigenous characters. Concurrently, there has been an emergence of gifted Indigenous writers—and their presence has led to a further questioning over the role non-Indigenous writers might have in creating Indigenous characters. This paper engages with the debate about whether non-Indigenous writers have the moral and imaginative right to create Indigenous characters in their fiction, and argues it is important non-Indigenous writers are not deterred from creating Indigenous characters, because the outcome would reinforce a culture of silence and lead to a type of ‘literary apartheid’—reducing the diversity and depth of voices within the Australian literary landscape concerning places and ideas that surround Indigenous people (Healy 2008; Miller 2010a).

This paper proposes that non-Indigenous writers employ a rigorous process to achieve an outcome of creating Indigenous characters that ‘ring true’. This process involves: fostering an appreciation of the context of sensitivity and responsibility inherent in creating Indigenous characters; an appropriate choice of character perspective; a process of intensive and immersive research; and, finally, setting the highest goals for empathetic writing to create a successful and believable product in the form of a completed novel. Acknowledging that writing fiction invariably involves writing ‘the other’, the paper proposes that once writers have navigated their way through the sensitive issues to create believable Indigenous characters, this process will strengthen their skills in creating ‘pitch-perfect’ characters which have any worldview divergent from their own, including beyond the Indigenous context.

As background for my interest in this topic, my PhD novel is based in a fictional Aboriginal community in the Kimberley, in Australia’s north-west. Over the past six years, I have spent several months living and working in and around Fitzroy Crossing, a remote town with a majority Indigenous population. In researching my novel, I have conducted oral history interviews with local Indigenous people living in the Fitzroy Valley area. In undertaking research over a prolonged period—in the forms of geographical and immersive field research, textual research and qualitative interviews—I have set out to create Indigenous characters that are believable within the contemporary context of the Kimberley, while maintaining a strong appreciation and respect for the privacy of individuals in recreating a fictional narrative. I have also interviewed Australian authors—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—who have published novels that include Indigenous characters, and these interviews have been referenced in this conference paper.

The academic debate that surrounds the issue of non-Indigenous writers creating Indigenous characters holds a broad spectrum of views. At one extremity, there is the proposition that non-Indigenous writers should avoid creating Indigenous characters (Heiss 2002). The words of Indigenous author and commentator Melissa Lucashenko are widely referenced in this discussion: ‘Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people? If it wasn’t Aboriginal people themselves, I suggest you go away and look at your own lives instead’ (2002 in Heiss: 199). When this timbre of criticism is levelled

at non-Indigenous writers, it risks being a strong deterrent to them choosing to, or continuing to, write a novel that might include Indigenous characters. Non-Indigenous author Phillip Gwynne came under criticism for his portrayal of Indigenous characters in his novel, *Deadly Unna?* (1997), which was later made into the film *Australian Rules*. After the experience, he now says: ‘I swore after that I would never put another Aboriginal character in my book’ (2010). Non-Indigenous author Alex Miller, whose two novels *Journey to the Stone Country* (2003) and *Landscape of Farewell* (2007), include Indigenous characters, acknowledges it is a sensitive area for writers: ‘These areas are liberally sewn with mines and I didn’t want to step on a mine - I didn’t want to blow a foot off in the event’ (2010a). These comments resonate with my experience in the process of researching and writing my novel. There were moments I felt discouraged for taking on the challenge, with its multiple layers of complexity. The majority of this concern was self-reflective, however I was confronted on more than one occasion with suspicions about my project that caused me to deeply explore that question: What right *do* I have to recreate the world I was living in within my fiction?

Australia has many examples throughout its literary history of insensitive and offensive portrayals of Indigenous characters by non-Indigenous writers, and this is what has fuelled the academic discourse over the past two decades. I propose that it is important to continue the discourse of negotiating any boundaries that might surround the process of non-Indigenous writers creating Indigenous characters. It is likely all writers of realist fiction strive to create characters that are believable and therefore successful in their fictional representation. I argue it is important that this debate is not characterised by a view that non-Indigenous writers should avoid creating Indigenous characters, because doing so would not only create a form of ‘literary apartheid’ (Miller 2010a)—a fictional landscape short-changed in its representation of Australia’s Indigenous population, it would also make it virtually impossible for non-Indigenous writers to write about certain places in Australia. Years after the *Deadly Unna?* (1997) controversy, Gwynne decided to set his detective novel *The Build Up* (2008) in Darwin and realised he had to revisit the challenge of including Indigenous characters because, he says, it would be ‘ridiculous’ to write a novel set in multicultural Darwin that didn’t include Indigenous characters (2010).

This notion is supported by comments from Indigenous academic and author Larissa Behrendt whose novels *Home* (2004) and *Legacy* (2009) focus predominantly upon Indigenous issues and experience. Behrendt says Australian literature would be impoverished if writers weren’t writing Indigenous characters into their work:

If we’re looking for the great Australian novel it would be extraordinary to have that be something that doesn’t talk about land, and if you’re talking about land, how can you not talk about Indigenous people? (2010a).

A significant aspect of fiction is writing ‘the other’ and this requires writers to undergo a process of crossing boundaries of perspective and conjuring creations from the depths of their imagination. In this way, writers present their fictional worlds with characters that come from many walks of life. Without this process of creation, novels would be a homogenous puree, leached of all texture and flavour, with a dull cast of characters that all share the same experience and outlook as the author. It would, in

fact, be a dull fantasy world, one that could never resemble the diversities and tensions—the *realities*—of life. It is useful to contemplate how the process of non-Indigenous authors creating Indigenous characters sits within the broader context of writers creating characters that have any worldview divergent from their own.

Switching to a reader's perspective to contextualise the question, Miller says when he was younger he was an 'under-class type person' and the novels he read that portrayed working-class characters—'always written by middle-class people'—never resonated with his experience (2010a). Behrendt argues it is always a challenge for an author to write across the boundaries of their personal experience:

When you write cross cultures or cross genders or cross sexuality—if you don't understand what the worldview is of that person, then you can't get inside their head and that's true whether they're Indigenous, or for me someone who is gay or someone who is religious, or something (2010b).

Behrendt's novels have many non-Indigenous characters and she says it is easier for her, and people who are from other minority sectors of society, to create believable characters that hold a dominant worldview because they are immersed in that view on a daily basis, and therefore have a deeper understanding of it from which to accurately depict fictional characters (2010a). However, in her novels Behrendt has created characters that are religious and homosexual and this fact does not carry a question of her moral and imaginative right to do so in the way that is imputed when non-Indigenous writers create Indigenous characters.

When presented within this broader context, a writer might ask: 'Aren't we being over-sensitive about this issue? There's no discussion about whether a female author has the right to create a male character—this right is assumed—so why is it any different for a non-Indigenous writer creating an Indigenous character?' Such a suggestion might be considered to exist at the opposite end of the spectrum to Lucashenko's comments, referenced earlier, (2002 in Heiss: 199), and I propose it is helpful for all writers to seek an answer to it.

It is Australia's history of dispossession of its Indigenous people and appropriation not only of land but also of cultural ideas and knowledge that creates the atmosphere of concern. The level of sensitivity surrounding non-Indigenous writers creating Indigenous characters has been equated with the concerns of Jewish people not wanting Germans to create Jewish characters about the Holocaust (Miller 2010; Schlink 2009). It must be acknowledged that a history of dispossession and trauma caused by a dominant culture creates these heightened sensitivities. German law professor Bernard Schlink is author of *The Reader* (1995), a novel that has been criticised for its sympathetic portrayal of German woman Hanna Schmitz, a character that has committed war atrocities. In his book of essays, *Guilt about the Past*, Schlink writes:

There are people who were not heard or not seen and who want their truth acknowledged, traumatised people who want their trauma respected, people deprived of a dignified life who want their dignity restored. Their expectations come to the fore whenever someone writes about the past they experienced (2007: 117).

Once understood within this context, non-Indigenous writers might better appreciate the heightened sensitivity some Indigenous people have about their representation in fiction. This awareness carries with it a particular responsibility, which was a theme discussed by the writers I interviewed about their process of creating Indigenous characters. Non-Indigenous author Stephen Gray, whose novel *The Artist is a Thief* (2001) is set in a fictional Aboriginal community in an undisclosed part of the Northern Territory, spoke of a responsibility for non-Indigenous writers to ‘educate and immerse’ themselves to gain sufficient knowledge to accurately portray Indigenous characters (2010). Miller spoke of: ‘A responsibility to what you believe and feel is the truth of the cultural history you’re involving yourself in, and that’s a pretty touchy one, there’s some very sharp stuff in there’ (2010a).

The concern among some commentators is that most non-Indigenous writers lack the depth of knowledge about Indigenous people and culture to be able to create Indigenous characters that are true to life. Behrendt is concerned that many non-Indigenous writers simply don’t understand the complexity of the task they are taking on once they make the decision to proceed (2010). She points to Thomas Keneally’s novel *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) and Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) as examples of talented writers who purport to be sympathetic to Indigenous people, but have misinterpreted Aboriginal culture in an ‘offensive’ way:

So you can come from a place of thinking that you know, and you can come from a place of good intention, and you can be a really gifted writer, and then you can stuff it up because you don’t know what you don’t know (2010a).

Indigenous author and academic Anita Heiss says a good intention, while not sufficient of itself, is a relevant consideration:

[T]here’s room at the table for everyone [Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers], the issue is *why* are whitefellas writing about blackfellas, *what* does their work contribute to our representation, and is it empowering to us? (2010).

Behrendt suggests one way for non-Indigenous writers to stay on ‘safer ground’ is to maintain a non-Indigenous point of view in their work. She believes the more successful engagements with Indigenous characters in novels have been when authors have not tried to tell the story from an Indigenous perspective, and cites Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005) and Liam Davidson’s *The White Woman* (1994) as two works that have been sensitively and successfully executed (2010a). In support of this view, the non-Indigenous authors I interviewed were emphatic in their decision to write from a non-Indigenous perspective (Gemmell 2010; Gray 2010; Miller 2010a). In their novels, a white protagonist is surrounded by a predominantly Indigenous worldview, and is responding to their surrounds as an outsider.

However, even where writers opt to create their work from within ‘safer’ boundaries by not writing from an Indigenous perspective, it still does not overcome the issue of misrepresentation of Indigenous people. Once any character is created, their thoughts and emotions are revealed by their words, silences, actions or inactions, regardless of which perspective the work is written from. Writers need to maintain awareness of mis-representations in all their writing. I suggest a process of thorough research and enquiry is an important way for non-Indigenous writers to respond to this. When

writers lack sufficient depth of knowledge of their subjects, in any field, they run the risk of oversimplifying or stereotyping characters or the scenarios the characters interact within (Australia Council). It follows that non-Indigenous writers who strive to create believable Indigenous characters will need to accept this requires a process of deep research, which Heiss says is an approach all writers should adopt, regardless of the topic:

If you don't *know* Aboriginal people, communities and aspects of culture, either don't write about them or get to know them. I wouldn't write about farmers or farming without having spent some time living on the land or around farmers, and I would certainly get them to read some samples of the work in which I wrote about them (2010).

The non-Indigenous writers I interviewed undertook their research primarily through an immersive experience, stemming from their employment. Miller, who worked as a ringer in Central Queensland in the 1950s, and has had lifelong friendships with Aboriginal people says: 'There's a lifetime involved in both books, several lifetimes of different people ... I'm not writing about stuff I don't know about' (2010a). Similarly, Gray spent many years working in Darwin as an academic where he had Aboriginal colleagues, and flatmates and friends who had lived in Aboriginal communities across the Territory (2010). Non-Indigenous author of *Cleave* (1998), Nikki Gemmell, spent five years working in and around Darwin and Alice Springs as an ABC radio journalist. In reflecting on her experience, Gemmell says:

Aboriginal culture is like an iceberg—we see the tiny tip of it and there's this huge world underneath the surface that you can only scratch at in a tiny, tiny way and that's what I wanted to write about—those little tiny scratchings on the surface (2010).

Inherent in Gemmell's words is an appreciation that there will always be much she either does not know or will never understand about Indigenous culture, and I believe this is a useful attitude for all non-Indigenous writers to maintain throughout their process of research. A statement by Indigenous editor Sandra Phillips reminds non-Indigenous writers that almost no amount of research will overcome their status as outsiders to Indigenous culture:

For a non-Indigenous author to achieve a true feel to their representation on Indigenous subject matter ... and character ... they would need to be very encultured with Indigenous culture. And if they are not, they are writing as outsiders to that culture and their representation would be vastly different to the representation defined, developed and refined by an Indigenous writer (1997: 13).

This statement provides the platform to a valuable discussion. It is evident that representation of Indigenous characters will vary whether written by Indigenous or non-Indigenous writers, and I suggest this fact serves to benefit, rather than diminish, the richness of the Australian literary landscape. Behrendt says there has been a 'renaissance of talented Indigenous writers' and she suggests this might prompt non-Indigenous writers to reconsider their purpose for writing stories that contain Indigenous characters and themes (2010). While I agree it is important that all non-Indigenous writers reflect upon their process—and take the necessary steps to address the inherent sensitivities of creating Indigenous characters—I disagree this should

deter non-Indigenous writers from entering this space. I propose that a larger body of work, created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers incorporating Indigenous characters, will encourage a dialogic relationship within the literary sphere and provide readers with greater access and empathy to this under-represented, and sometimes overlooked, world of Indigenous experience, and the ongoing exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Healy 2008; Reynolds 1999).

It is noteworthy that many non-Indigenous writers are inspired to include Indigenous characters within their fiction after experiencing a profound engagement with Indigenous people, places and culture (Gemmell 2010; Gray 2010; Miller 2010a). In my thesis novel, a key theme contemplated by the work is the protagonist's feelings of being an outsider to a culture, language and worldview that contrast her own—and one she is experiencing in her home country of Australia. The character confronts tensions and conflicts externally and internally in coming to terms with the surroundings she is experiencing as 'foreign'. This is a transformative experience for this character, and the novel aims to evoke a fictional representation of the experience that 'rings true' for many of the non-Indigenous Australians who encounter Indigenous culture in this immersive way.

When a writer is at the point of writing a novel—whether this occurs concurrently with research or subsequent to it—it is suggested the writer sets aside the self-conscious reflections and responsibilities proposed in this paper, and focuses instead on infusing imagination and empathy into scenes and characters. Gwynne calls it 'the kiss of death' if writers feel weighed under a burden of responsibility during the writing process (2010). Behrendt agrees writers should be uninhibited—'when you sit down and write as a writer, you don't edit'—she says that the sensitivity and depth of research is contemplated before the writing process and the negotiation of what is included is better suited to later, with editors and publishers (2010b).

Writing fiction necessarily involves an imaginative process as writers set out to create characters and scenes that didn't happen, but that could have, or might have happened. When writers create characters that have a worldview divergent from their own, I propose this process of re-imagination requires an extra leap, a sharper focus, and is inherently a greater challenge, than when writing from within their own worldview. Miller says Martin Amis' novel *The Information* (1995) was the first time he read a middle-class writer who had created a believable working-class character, and this was something he celebrated. 'It was pitch perfect . . . the guy had such a brilliant ear, he got it right - and that was the only justification for doing it' (2010). The proposition that creating a character can be justified by its skilful creation is more acute when creating characters that are Indigenous because of the sensitive debate surrounding it.

In setting out to create characters that 'ring true' and can therefore be 'justified', writers might engage in a process of re-imagining these characters with empathy. Miller says:

Empathy is the aspect of writing a novel that affords you intimacy with characters. People say, 'how do you write a character who is a woman'. It is with empathy: by *being* them (2010b).

Further, Behrendt, through undertaking her own process of rigorous research and empathetic writing, says she created scenes in her novel that her father later told her were presented in fiction in exactly the way they had happened (2010a). Miller believes it is critical that people he writes about identify aspects of themselves in his writing: ‘If people I write about don’t recognise themselves, then it’s no good. It hasn’t *happened* yet’ (2010a).

I suggest it is this outcome, which Miller calls ‘happening’, that fiction writers aspire to when undertaking the multifaceted processes of completing their novels. When fiction ‘happens’ it has the power to capture the imaginations and elicit emotional responses from readers - not only toward the characters within the novel, but also toward the people or the sector of the community these characters represent.

Through fiction, Gray says he is able to better explore and communicate some of the realities and complexities of his broader policy work:

If [the novel] is good, you’re appealing to something in the heart and the emotions and the soul of the person ... you’re trying to get to the heart of those kinds of irreconcilable conflicts in a way you can’t quite do within a formal, legalistic framework (2010a).

Similarly, Behrendt says she has been able to communicate her experiences and convey her arguments in a more compelling and influential way through her fiction:

I do all this work around law reform, and you can tell people 100 times why the Northern Territory intervention is a cruel policy but unless you can show this human side of it—forget your legal arguments—this is the way to convince people ... You can reach so many more people with that whisper rather than with the shout (2010a).

I would urge non-Indigenous writers not to be discouraged by the discourse that surrounds their right to create Indigenous characters. Both the non-Indigenous and the Indigenous voice and perspective validly contribute to the richness of representation of Indigenous characters and can combine to provide readers with access to fictional worlds that offer truthful representations of cross-cultural exchange. Rather than being deterred, non-Indigenous writers are encouraged to engage with this discussion and develop an appreciation of its context and multi-layered complexities, and then apply a process that involves a depth of research and finally empathetic writing to set themselves the highest goal of creating Indigenous characters that ring true.

## Works cited

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Guidelines for ethical research in Indigenous Studies* <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical.html>

Australia Council for the Arts 2007 *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian writing*, Second edition, Strawberry Hills, NSW. Available online at [www.australiacouncil.gov.au](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au).

Behrendt, Larissa 2004 *Home* St Lucia: UQP

Behrendt, Larissa 2009 *Legacy* St Lucia: UQP

Behrendt, Larissa 2010a Interviewed in person by Anneli Knight, 6 August 2010

Behrendt, Larissa 2010b, Byron Bay Writers’ Festival 2010, Public forum “Writing Indigenous characters” 6 August 2010

- Gemmell, Nikki 1998 *Cleave Milsons Point*: Vintage
- Gemmell, Nikki 2010 Interviewed in person by Anneli Knight, 25 June 2010
- Gray, Stephen 2001 *The Artist is a Thief* Australia: Allen & Unwin
- Gray, Stephen 2010 Interviewed in person by Anneli Knight, 1 June 2010
- Gwynne, Phillip 1997 *Deadly Unna?* Australia: Penguin Books
- Gwynne, Phillip 2008 *The Build Up* Australia: Pan Macmillan
- Gwynne, Phillip 2010 Byron Bay Writers' Festival 2010, Public forum "Writing Indigenous characters" 6 August 2010
- Healy, Chris 2008 *Forgetting Aborigines* Sydney: UNSW Press
- Heiss, Anita 2010 Interviewed via email exchange by Anneli Knight, October 2010
- Heiss, Anita 2002 'Writing about Indigenous Australia—some issues to consider and protocols to follow: a discussion paper' *Southerly* 62:2, 197
- Miller, Alex 2007 *Landscape of Farewell* Australia: Allen & Unwin
- Miller, Alex 2003 *Journey to the Stone Country* Australia: Allen & Unwin
- Miller, Alex 2009 *Waxing wiser than oneself* *The Australian Literary Review*, 7 October 2009, pp 24-5
- Miller, Alex 2009 *The Books Show* Radio National, 11 November 2009
- Miller, Alex 2010a Interviewed in person by Anneli Knight, 6 August 2010
- Miller, Alex 2010 Byron Bay Writers' Festival 2010, Public forum "What lies beneath: intimate lives of ordinary people" 7 August 2010
- Phillips, Sandra 2007 quoted in Willa McDonald's 'Tricky business: whites on black territory' *Australian Author* 29:1, 13
- Reynolds, Henry 1999 *Why weren't we told* Australia: Penguin Books
- Schlink, Bernard 1995 *The Reader* London: Vintage International
- Schlink, Bernard 2009 *Guilt About the Past* St Lucia: UQP