

Foreign Correspondence

Stories to Make Mountains Start Breathing

BY JUDITH RIDGE

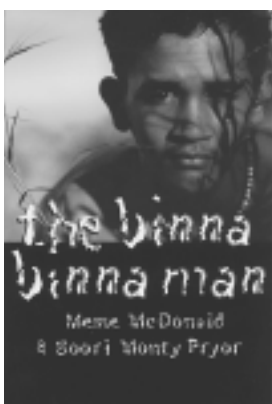
When Popeye Bobby walks in, everybody stands back. He's real gentle this old fulla, but no one messes with him, neither. He's real powerful... He can tell you stories that make mountains start breathing.

—from *The Binna Binna Man*

by Meme McDonald and Boori Monty Pryor

In 1998, at the height of a popular movement for social, political, and spiritual reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, a remarkable book was published. *Maybe Tomorrow* is a memoir, written by Boori Monty Pryor, an Aboriginal Australian who hails from the Kunggandji and Birra-gubba nations of far north Queensland, and his partner Meme McDonald—a *migaloo jalbu*, or “white woman,” in Boori’s peoples’ language. *Maybe Tomorrow* tells of Boori’s life as an Aboriginal man living between two cultures; his work as a storyteller and performer in schools, prisons, and libraries; his family and the many tragedies they have faced. The memoir’s perspective on the often-difficult relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia is particularly noteworthy because it is told with dignity, humor, optimism, and a total lack of bitterness or anger. It’s a book I believe every Australian ought to read.

Maybe Tomorrow also signaled the beginning of an unusual creative collaboration. Meme and Boori have since co-authored four novels for children and teenagers. *My Girragundji*, *The Binna Binna Man*, and *Njunjul the Sun* are narrated by a young Aboriginal boy who ages from about twelve to young adulthood over the course of the novels. They tell the story of a boy caught between two worlds—the old ways of his Aboriginal culture and the contemporary *migaloo* (white) world. The fourth novel, *Flytrap*, is based on a real event in the life of Meme’s daughter Grace. All four



novels are illustrated with photographs taken by Meme, using members of Boori's family to represent characters in the stories.

In *My Girragundji*, the boy is frightened at home by a bad spirit, a Hairyman, and by his parents' unpredictable moods. At school he's picked on by bullies for being Aboriginal, and in turn he bullies his sisters. One night, terrified that the Hairyman is coming for him, he begs his ancestors for help, and a green tree frog—a *girragundji*—lands on him. The frog becomes more than a pet to the boy—she's a talisman, a protector, sent by the ancestors, and she brings the boy an understanding of his own inner strength, even after her untimely death.

The Binna Binna Man (another name for the Hairyman) takes the boy on a darker journey as he and his family travel north for the funeral of his cousin, who, the book implies, has committed suicide. It's a story that has particular, poignant resonance for anyone who has read *Maybe Tomorrow*. Similar to the losses suffered in many Aboriginal families, Boori has lost two brothers and a sister to suicide and a young nephew in a police car chase. (Their photographs appear

on the cover of *Maybe Tomorrow*, forming a sort of sunburst around Boori's head.) The high rate of Aboriginal suicide—more than twice the national average—is just one of the many tragic results of a sorry history of the treatment of Indigenous Australians: physical and cultural displacement, institutionalized racism, and out-and-out attempts at genocide. *The Binna Binna Man* also addresses, with great understanding and care, the problem of alcohol abuse among some sections of the Indigenous community.

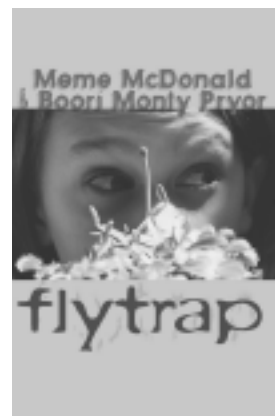
Njunjul the Sun sees our young narrator in his later teens, sad and angry and getting into trouble. Like many young Aboriginal men, he doesn't know where his place is in either the Aboriginal or the *migaloo* world—so he heads down from the bush to the "big smoke" (the city) to stay with his Aunty and Uncle to sort himself out. There, he starts accompanying his Uncle Garth, a storyteller and performer, on school visits, and begins to find his way as an Aboriginal man.

It's evident that the stories are drawn from Boori's life and family and culture; but he emphasizes that the stories aren't about him: "I'm part of the story, I'm not the whole story." But the stories do belong to his people and his culture, and it's this essential fact that makes the collaborative process of writing and editing these books so different from the usual mialoo way of doing things.

Meme had published books prior to meeting Boori and writing *Maybe Tomorrow* with him, whereas Boori's great skill is in oral storytelling. (The Australian Aboriginal oral tradition is a powerful and ancient one, and maintaining its integrity is extremely important to Aboriginal people. Story is also in an intrinsic part of law and spirituality in Aboriginal culture: some stories can be told only at certain times of year, for example, or as part of Ceremony.) It would be a mistake, though, to assume that Meme is merely the scribe for Boori's stories, or that Boori does none of the writing. Their two sets of skills and their two different cultures come together to create something that's more than either of them separately.

The personal and cultural benefits of their collaboration are enormous, and to fully appreciate them it's important to have some historical and cultural background. In 1788 the British colonized (or invaded, depending on your point of view) this continent on the principle of *terra nullius*—a land belonging to no one, there for the taking with no regard for the sovereignty of the more than 600 Aboriginal Nations living here. (The concept of *terra nullius* is in fact so deeply ingrained in the national psyche that Aboriginal Australians were not even considered citizens of their own country until 1967.)

Land, or "Country," is crucial to the identity of Aboriginal people—it's the source of their spiritual and cultural identity, and Aboriginal people have lived in a physically and culturally symbiotic relationship with Country for millennia. As the British spread across the continent, Aboriginal people everywhere were driven off Country, often into church-run missions where they were



Top: cover from *Njunjul the Sun*. Photo by Meme McDonald.

Bottom: cover from *Flytrap*. Photo by Meme McDonald.



not permitted to speak their own language or to perform Ceremony. It's a dispossession that has had devastating ramifications for Aboriginal people down to the present day.

Meme explains the deeper level on which the collaboration with Boori functions:

It's to do with connections of spirit. I don't want to be mysterious about this. It's very practical. We both live in this land that both of us care a lot about. And both of us come from cultures that have a connection to the Land. Boori comes from a culture that has an ageless, endless pathway back into the Land and knowledge of how to work with it and the stories that teach you about it. My culture is Western Queensland sheep and cattle property, but a very strong connection to the Land in the short term. My family has been part of that landscape for ninety years as opposed to 60,000 years, but nonetheless in that time it becomes what you are, it is your identity. Boori's culture has given me a freedom to talk about the white person's connection to the Land...

When you're writing something like *My Girragundji*, the spirituality of that book is neither Aboriginal nor of any culture. It is of a connection with Land and with the creatures that you share the planet with—a common spirituality to almost every particular form of worship. And if that wasn't there the books would be pleasant stories, but I don't think they would have the impact that they do.

Aboriginal culture is also very strong on, as Meme puts it, "protocol, permission, and respect." And so, long before their books go to the publisher, Meme and Boori take the stories back to Boori's

family, sharing the stories with the elders, who become in effect the books' first editors. It's a process that has opened up possibilities for their stories and for themselves as writers in ways they never dreamed possible.

As a non-Indigenous writer, albeit one with a long association with Aboriginal culture and causes, Meme acknowledges that at first the idea of taking stories back to Boori's people was a challenge:

Because as a writer in my culture, you come from a belief that you have the right to write whatever you bloody well want. So I wondered how this was going to work. But the beauty of this culture is that, if you're still in a continuum with your family and your ancestors, then the importance of going back to the elders as the first editors is because of what they're going to add, not what they're going to take away... In fact, it's going to make it, as an art form, more powerful, because it actually connects into a community.

The Binna Binna Man illustrates this well. Boori and Meme had a deadline looming and five days scheduled to take the incomplete manuscript up north to Queensland from their home in Melbourne. They'd planned for one of Boori's nieces to "star" in the photographs as the narrator's cousin—but she was in juvenile detention, and another niece had to step in. The old Kingswood motorcar (an iconic Australian model) that was to be photographed for the book had been sold. A four-hour road trip turned into a two-day meander across Country to catch up with family and friends. The experience required Meme to "shift from the rush hour culture that pre-plans" everything and to appreciate this apparent chaos as "a completely other way of doing things... achieved by getting over to the right way of doing things, which is to take your time, to respect family, to let unfold what is intended to be unfolded."

Up north, the elder to whom Boori and Meme take their stories is Boori's Aunty Val. It's not a case of sitting down with the manuscript and blue pencil—this first editing process mostly happens in accordance with the Aboriginal oral tradition and in the Aboriginal way of letting things "unfold." Meme and Boori will mostly talk about the stories with the elders, occasionally reading sections, but mostly just talking it through. And as time goes on, responses emerge. The practical outcome in this instance was finding, with Aunty Val's help, the way to end *The Binna Binna Man*.

Boori explains this process that seems quite mysterious to the outsider (he's an elder himself, but still learning stories and law

from his parents and Aunties and Uncles): “How I see it is that there’s a space there and it will only be filled in when the time is right and when you are ready to understand why that space is being filled in. It’s kind of sitting back and waiting for your head-space to open up so you’re well enough in your mind to be able to accept what the elders give you.”

The stories themselves have a way of arriving when their time has come to be told. *My Girragundji* had its beginnings on a wet Melbourne afternoon when Meme’s daughter Grace began badgering Boori for a story—while they were watching the football, of all times! (Melbournians take their Australian Rules football very seriously.) Come halftime, Boori began to tell the story of the pet frog he’d had as a child. Grace was enthralled, and Meme recognized the great potential the story had for all readers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike:

Grace was so fascinated . . . It’s got a sad ending, and most kids have sad endings with their pets. That’s what started to make me think, How could you write a story about a pet that gets eaten by a snake, and yet have that as an elevating story? So, it started to come out more because of its story potential than because we’re writing an Aboriginal boy’s story—it was a good story, and we had proof of it.

A few years later, Grace herself provided the inspiration for *Flytrap*. She had lied to her teacher, claiming she had a Venus flytrap and would bring it in to show her classmates, and the lie became unbearable. Holding true to the principles of consultation and respect for ownership of story, Meme and Boori read drafts of the novel with Grace and took into account her responses to the fictional version of her own story. Meme believes that though these principles are specific to Aboriginal culture, “they’re actually great principles in terms of families living their lives.”

Flytrap includes a couple of traditional stories from Boori’s people, told to Nancy, the main character, by her stepfather, Gee. One tells how the echidna got its quills, another explains why there are two types of yam. Boori and Meme took an early draft of the book to Aunty Val. The echidna story was fine, but the yam story was problematic, as part of the story is only to be told to boys at a certain age. Boori says, “Aunty’s reading through it, and she called us over for a cup of tea and she goes, Now, see those bits there, you can leave them in, but if something happens to you in the next couple of weeks—well, you’re an elder now, you have to make the decision.”

Aunty Val was reminding Boori that consequences would come back to him as a result of transgressing the law associated with that story. This eventually became part of the plot of *Flytrap*, in a scene where Nancy tells the story to her classmates. "The Story of the Two Yams" is about two Creator brothers, one hard-working, the other a trickster-type character:

Nancy explains that this part of the story is only for boys to hear. Gee couldn't tell her what it was that the Creator did to make his brother's yam sour.

"That's secret," she says.

Some boys up the back of the class smother a giggle, as if they already know.

It's a fascinating concept of story—that what is most powerful lies in what cannot be said. The experience made Meme realize that "stories are our lifeblood—they instruct us how to live and how to be and what visions to hold true. They're fundamental to the happiness of our lives, so they're very precious. So in that sense, I think if you start to regard stories as an absolute essential of life, rather than a distraction from life, then how you evolve them and in what context, what respect you have for the source of that story, becomes very important whatever culture you come from."

The point of all of this, of course, is that this new—or, rather, most ancient—way of creating stories isn't just an issue for Aboriginal people. In fact, it's not even just about story—it's about life and culture and creating a society based on principles of respect and collaboration. It's just as Uncle Garth says to his nephew at the end of *Njunjul the Sun*:

That culture's like medicine. It can heal you. It can heal all these other fullas living here now, not knowing where they belong. For healing, we need whitefullas to hear about our culture. We need whitefullas to heal first so that we can heal. We gotta keep these stories going if we gonna keep ourselves alive.

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