



## Diversity and multiculturalism in Australian children's picture books

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**Abstract:** “Children should be empowered through literature, encouraged to grow, to learn about themselves and others” (Bradford). It is important that all children see themselves reflected in books, to see the broader possibilities of the world and their place within it. The communities, families and groups of children depicted in children's picture books in Australia have changed to reflect the diversity of cultures, the cross cultural marriages, and multicultural communities. The 2006 census reported that 44% of Australians were born overseas or had at least one overseas born parent.

**Keywords:** Australia, illustration, multiculturalism, children, literature.

This paper will show that Australian children's publishing reflects a range of cultures, voices and settings that allows all children, whatever their background, to see themselves in the stories. The stories allow children to discover both the differences and the similarities of other languages and cultures within Australia, and to gain an understanding of other lives and experiences.

### Background

To give this discussion some context I will give a quick overview of migration to Australia. The Aboriginal people were the first inhabitants, living in harmony with the land for thousands of years before the arrival of the British in 1788. There were hundreds of tribes and language groups across Australia, eventually mapped by anthropologist Norman Tinsdale. “By the late 1980s..., only 47% of the population was British and “Old Australian”, 23% was composed of non-English speaking migrants and children, while 30% was a mixture and “growing” (Pearce, 2003: 235). In 1985, Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that 1.5% of the population were Indigenous Australians. By 2006, that figure had increased to 2.5% of the total population. Later tides of migration were from Asia, and today's immigrants come from the United Kingdom, Africa, Afghanistan, China, India and beyond.

To show this mix in a more personal way, I live close to the city in an apartment, and some of my neighbours backgrounds are Chinese, Aboriginal, East Timorese, Sri Lankan and Bosnian. Among my group of friends there is a person born in the UK married to a first generation Australian of Italian parents, and another



couple where he is Buddhist and was born in Sri Lanka, she is Australian and Catholic. They all call themselves Australian.

Australian children's literature has been and still is influenced by "the cultural and ideological shifts which have informed discussions around Australianness, citizenship and identity since 1972, when the government enunciated its vision of a multicultural Australia" (Bradford 2007: 36). On their website, the Office of Multicultural Interests defines multiculturalism as

A term used to describe the recognition of cultural and ethnic diversity. In Western Australia, it means all Western Australians are entitled to exercise their rights and participate fully in society, regardless of their different linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds ([http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi\\_terminology.asp](http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi_terminology.asp))

Diakiw commented that "children's literature, by including all racial and ethnocultural origins, will play an important role in affirming Australian... culture and identity" (Diakiw, 1997: 36).

### **The Picture Books**

Picture books are unique among children's literature, as they are one of the ways a young child first discovers their world and their place within it. Books can be seen as "crucial agents of the socialization of the young into appropriate channels of behaviour and deportment" (Pearce, 2003: 238).

This paper will focus on a picture book from each decade from 1970 to 1990, showing how they have foreshadowed the books published for children in Australia today. Some of these books have been shortlisted for or have won prizes in the Children's Book of the Year Awards, coordinated by the Children's Book Council of Australia.

As I began reading more widely for this paper, I became increasingly aware that exploring diversity in children's literature is enormously complex, and it is difficult to do justice to such a topic in this short paper. So I have chosen to write from a personal perspective, growing up in the age of multiculturalism in Australia, and during the golden age of children's picture books in the 1970s. I work at the State Library of Western Australia, with access to the Research Collection of Children's Literature, and worked in public libraries for many years. These experiences, and the



influence of the place and time in which I have grown up, have shaped the books I have chosen to share with you in this paper.

### **The 1970s**

One of the first books of Aboriginal myths and legends I remember encountering was *The Rainbow Serpent* by Dick Roughsey. I was entranced by the vibrant and attractive illustrations, and borrowed the book many times from the library. The story tells how Gooriala, the Rainbow Serpent, travelled the Australian continent, creating gorges, rivers, billabongs, mountains, hills and caves. The book won the Picture Book of the Year award in 1976, and was, I believe, the first time a person of Aboriginal descent had won the award.

When discussing this paper with friends, they have all remembered this book, some seeing it performed as a play, others reading it at school. Speaking to local Aboriginal elder, Richard Walley, who was looking at a copy of the book on display at the Library, he commented that the book was written “from the inside”, and that was why it was so effective and different from many of the books written before.

Prior to this, there had been many books written and illustrated with Aboriginal themes, and myths and legends, often by non-Aboriginal people. Many Aboriginal stories were first told in print by people who worked and lived with them, including two sisters from a Western Australian pioneering family, Mary and Elizabeth Durack.

One of their books was first published in 1964 under the title of *The Courteous Savage*. Written by Mary and illustrated by Elizabeth, the book is about the Aboriginal leader Yagan, and won the Book of the Year award in 1965. The first illustration in the book depicts the arrival of the British, with soldiers and a captain in a small boat heading towards the shore.

The book was then re-published in 1976 under the title *Yagan of the Bibbulmun*, and was illustrated by an Aboriginal man, Revel Cooper. The same event, as illustrated by Cooper, shows a group of Aboriginal people sitting on the shore, a striking example of different perspectives of the same event.

*The Rainbow Serpent* and its predecessors paved the way for many successful partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous authors and illustrators, and also



books written, illustrated and published by Aboriginal people. The books are not only about Aboriginal myths and legends, but also about everyday events, such as playing football, and they often introduce readers to different Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English.

*Olive Python Dreaming* was published in 2001 by children at a school in Roebourne in far north-western Australia. The children illustrated a dreaming story told by a local elder, and the story is told showing the Yindjibarndi language at the top of the page, Aboriginal English in the middle, and Standard Australian English at the bottom.

In 2009, Ambelin Kwaymullina wrote and illustrated her own fable, *Caterpillar and Butterfly*. The vivid illustrations and style of writing are rooted in her Aboriginal heritage but with a modern twist. This teaching story has messages about overcoming your fears to reach your full potential. Last year, the winning Picture Book of the Year, *Collecting colour*, told the story of women and children in an Aboriginal community going out to collect pandanus and ‘colour’ plants to make baskets, mats and bags. The story is told by a small white girl, Rose, with her Aboriginal friend, Olive. The vivid illustrations are cleverly created using pandanus, paper and paint, and the story is based on the authors own experience of living and working in the Gunbalanya community in Arnhem Land, which is known for its fibre arts.

And finally, it is important to mention Magabala Books, which publishes books by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all over Australia. Established in 1987, Magabala Books is based in Broome, and this publisher is one of the reasons that Aboriginal people and their stories are so well represented in Australian children’s literature today.

So we have travelled from 1970 to 2010 looking briefly at Aboriginal representation in picture books both as subject and creators. In the next two decades I will explore other representations of diversity.

### **The 1980s**

In 1985, *The Kinder Hat* by Morag Loh and illustrated by Donna Rawlins was published. This simple story, about a little girl who creates a wonderful hat at



kindergarten for her Mum to wear home, was always a favourite at storytime. It was one of the first picture books to show a multi-racial group of children, and a mixed race family (Dad is Chinese), but all that information is contained in the illustrations not the text. Information on the end papers says that, “as a member of a large multi-cultural family (her husband is Chinese, her bother-in-law is Italian) [Morag Loh] wanted her story to reflect Australia’s ethnic diversity”.

*Big Dog* by Libby Gleeson, illustrated by Armin Greder, was published in 1991, and in this story, one of the main characters just happens to be Chinese, what David Beagley calls “just part of the scenery” (Beagley, 2006). The children work together to solve the problem of a scary dog, and in the annotation about the book by Australian online journal “The Source” it states: “Three children are frightened of the big dog up the street and plan to scare it with their New Year dragon costume. But when they meet the dog it proves to be friendly after all. Appealing, lively illustrations”. Cultural diversity is not even highlighted as a theme.

*Big Dog* won the Australian Multicultural Children’s Literature Award, which was awarded by the Office of Multicultural Affairs from 1991 to 1995. Books winning this award were selected because “the issue was naturally integrated into the story line” (Beagley, 2006). I believe this book is a good example of how to represent diversity, because it “actually takes [its] multicultural social context for granted as [it] gets on with [its] plot” (Pearce, 2003: 244). This is how most pre-school children experience the world of home, friends, kindergarten and the wider community today.

In 2002, *Guess the Baby* by Simon French, again illustrated by Donna Rawlins, shows a multi-racial group of children whose teacher invites them to bring a photograph of themselves as babies, and everyone has fun discovering who the babies are. Unlike Rawlins’ earlier book, the group of multi-racial children is generally not referred to in reviews of the book, rather the focus is on the gentle humour employed in the story.

### **The 1990s to now**

As evidence was collected about the importance of reading to the very young, board books became another picture book format for children. The following titles



show that reflecting the lives of children from all backgrounds had become commonplace in publishing, even for the very young.

*Peek-a-Boo!*, a cleverly designed lift-the-flap board book written and illustrated by Jan Ormerod, was published in 1997, and depicts a series of babies from many different backgrounds playing peek-a-boo over the course of a day, from getting dressed to bath and bed time. One of the reviews of this book on the Amazon website said that

My 8 month old daughter loved this wonderful book and claimed it as her favourite. It features wonderfully illustrated images of babies of different races, all enjoying a game of peek-a-boo in which the reader can join in by pulling down the flaps to uncover a different smiling toddler on each page. Being an English mother of an Anglo-Chinese baby, I was delighted to find illustrations of Oriental babies in this book and I have enjoyed asking her 'Where's the Baby?' in Cantonese too!

In 2005, the State Library of Western Australia began the pilot program of Better Beginnings. This early literacy program runs in partnership with local libraries and community health nurses to distribute board books to parents with new babies, encouraging them to read to their child from birth.

Feedback given in the evaluation of the pilot program showed that many Aboriginal parents did not identify with the books presented to them. This finding resulted in the coordinators of the program, Nola Allen and Margaret Kett, writing their own board book. The illustrations are photographs of babies from a child health centre in a very multicultural suburb that has a significant indigenous population. The *Baby Ways* board book was published in 2006, and is a vibrant celebration of diversity, showing photographs of six babies from different backgrounds in their every day worlds.

### **Conclusion**

By focussing on picture books that address a particular aspect of cultural diversity, this paper has shown that picture books today have built on the foundations laid in earlier years to reflect the multicultural make-up of Australian society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In finishing, I would like to mention Shaun Tan's book, *The Arrival*, which allows people of all ages and all backgrounds to discover what it is like to be a



stranger in a strange land, and experience life from a minority perspective. By using images to convey the story of a person travelling to a strange new world to make a new life for his family, anyone can gain an understanding of and empathise with other lives and experiences. Although there is always room to improve, Australian books today truly reflect the times in which they are created, and most children can find their own story and world reflected in a picture book.

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