

Telling Stories

By Larissa Behrendt

I was born into a culture that has a tradition of storytelling. Indigenous cultures across Australia have cultural on “Dreamtime” stories that explain our relationship to each other and to our land and also teach us about the standard of behaviour that are expected of us. These stories are like “law stories” or morality tales. Perhaps because I came from this background, I always knew that telling a story is a powerful way to influence people. Even now, as a lawyer and advocate for Aboriginal issues, I find that being able to explain in human terms how an unfair law or policy will affect a person’s life will be much more influential in getting politicians, policy makers, law makers or the general public to understand why we need law reform than sticking to simple, legalistic arguments.

I always loved writing. I enjoy writing stories and I find writing about the issues I believe in — social justice, reconciliation, government policy and Indigenous matters — to be an important and empowering thing. And I enjoyed writing when I was younger and my interest in politics was beginning. I used writing as a way of finding my voice. Even today I write both fiction and non-fiction to talk about the issues that are of continuing importance to Aboriginal people — the debilitating experiences of racism, the impact of poverty on families, the redeeming and healing power of love, identity and community — as a way of giving voice to these experiences.

My first novel, *Home*, was published in 2004. It is a fictionalised account of the experiences of three generations of an Aboriginal family, based loosely on my own experiences. I found myself returning to my love of writing fiction when I

was doing my postgraduate studies at Harvard Law School, and because I was overseas and missing my family, I wrote stories about them. *Home* looks at the way that the policy of removing Aboriginal children from their family leaves a lasting legacy in a family. I wanted to look at the psychological impact of this policy on the people who were removed and their family members who were left behind. It was also important to me to show that this legacy can still be seen in Aboriginal families today.

I felt that there was an urgency to tell that story because I felt that Australia was becoming increasingly disinterested in Indigenous issues. I had always thought that if people knew the human cost of policies like the removal of children on Aboriginal people that there would be increased understanding as to why our communities and families face the issues that we do.

Having seen the impact of the removal policy on my own family, I was shocked that some sectors of the Australian community responded to personal accounts from the stolen generations by attempting to deny their experience and trivialise their hurt and suffering. I felt it was really important to continue to tell those stories so they would not be marginalised or forgotten. Writing *Home* and getting it published was something I feel very proud of, and although it got mostly rave reviews, there was one that dismissed the book by saying that it was too political and not well edited. I was devastated at first, but the more I thought about it I felt proud that, even if there was a negative reaction, I had taken the brave step of putting a story I believe in out there. You can't expect to make a contribution to public life without getting criticism.

Because of my own love of writing, I have found judging the Future Leaders Writers' Prize to be an extremely uplifting experience, albeit a very difficult one because of the high calibre of entries.

The writings that are short-listed in the non-fiction sections have covered a broad range of social and political issues from youth suicide to reconciliation, from feminism to global warming to bias in the media. They are reflective of

the broad engagement that young people have in the issues that they know are shaping the world in which they are growing up in and which they are going to inherit. These emerging writers often see these issues through the eyes and with the voice of their generation and so often have perspectives that are both fresh and challenging.

The scope of topics covered in the entries in the fiction category has also been diverse. Exploring the many intricacies and complexities of human relationships and the human condition, the stories cover different cultures, different eras and the panoply of regret, loss, faith and love. I am always struck how insightful and reflective young writers are about matters that it can take some people a lifetime to understand.

While it is always a pleasure to read the writings of young people, especially at the level that the Future Leaders writers' Prize attracts, it is also, I find, a source of great hope. There is much said about how younger people are self-absorbed and uninterested in social issues but these writings — in both the fiction and non-fiction categories — highlight how these generations of young people are committed to strengthening the social fabric of our community, have an interest in exploring the challenging issues that confront us as a society and test our humanity. This writing is not just a testament to the individual talents of the authors; it reassures us that the future is in good hands.



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