Indigenous Australian Life Histories

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Indigenous Australian Life Histories
A New Genre of Writing and Publishing?
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Abstract: An increasing number of Australian indigenous autobiographies have been collaborations between their subject speakers, an often non-indigenous facilitator and, in one case, an initiating publisher. Most of these books are based on oral reminiscence, recorded and initially edited by the non-indigenous collaborator in consultation with the subject, a contact that is maintained while the book goes through the publication process. The characteristics of this genre are identified in the paper, along with the processes involved in creating, editing and publishing such texts. The role of the publisher in the origination and production of these works is also examined.

Keywords: Indigenous Australian, Writing, Orality, Publishing

This paper is about a new genre of Australian indigenous writing and publishing, or ‘Indigenous Australian Life Histories’. ‘Writing’ may not be an accurate or adequate description of this genre, as we will see, and there are some aspects of the publishing rationale that are also novel.

Overall, this paper constitutes a small case study of how historical and social realities, together with human needs intersect with commercial, technological and ideological imperatives to produce a new ‘writing’ and publishing genre. This is not a very ‘literary’ genre in the sense that it emanates from orality rather than from literacy (and so, of course, breaks many of the so-called rules of writing). But it is a developing genre of the Australian publishing industry that is a response to cultural needs as well as commercial pressures.

The paper is divided into 4 sections:

- A description of the genre and its characteristics
- The processes of generating a primary ‘manuscript’ – technological, editorial and human
- The publishing process
- Concluding discussion

The Genre
There are a number of identifiable elements that make up this new genre:

1) Interviews and/or sound recordings of indigenous people form the usual basis for the eventual published work. Occasionally the author will write the story down first, sometimes in an indigenous language. This may be translated by one collaborator and then edited by another, as in the case of Two Sisters: Ngarta & Jukuna by Ngarta Jinny Bent and Jukuna Mona Chuguna, Pat Lowe and Eirlys Richards (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004). In this case, Eirlys Richards translated the original manuscript while Pat Lowe edited it.

2) The originators of the life histories are located primarily in rural/regional locations throughout Australia, with Western Australia most strongly represented.

3) There are one or more usually non-indigenous collaborators - often not Australian born - who take the roles of trusted interviewer/recorder, transcriber and preliminary editor of the manuscript. They also function as ongoing overseers of the project through to publication and are, in effect, cultural, technological and production go-betweens.

An example of this is Alice Smith’s Under A Bilari Tree I Born (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002). The credit states: ‘Anna Vitenbergs and Loreen Brehaut recorded, transcribed and edited this story as directed by Alice Bilar Smith’. Another is Miles of Post and Wire by Florence Corrigan as told to Loreen Brehaut (Magabala Books 1998).

4) The life story of the individual is usually complemented with a considerable body of traditional lore and mythology, providing an insight into indigenous culture.

5) The stories often involve and/or refer to a search for missing family and/or ancestors. They almost always relate deep official interference in the lives presented and include copies of official documentation related to the separation of the authors from their families and culture at an early age. These bureaucratic artefacts of colonial oppression are even specified in the title of a recent example of the genre. Renee Baker: File # 28/EDP (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005) is Renee Baker’s story of her forced removal from family and country as a four-year-old ‘half-caste’. Once again, the telling of this unhappy
tale involves the mediations of a non-indigenous facilitator, in this case Bernadette Kennedy.

6) Although they are usually individual life histories, the focus is usually communal rather than individual. This was brought sharply home to me when I mentioned to my colleague, Kim Collard, that I had just reviewed his mother’s book, Busted Out Laughing. He told me that the manuscript had been circulated for some years among the Collard family and relations before it had been approved to go to publication. My guess is that a similar process probably goes on with other titles of this genre as this communal approach is very much the Aboriginal way of doing things.

7) Humour usually comes through as an integral aspect of the individual’s worldview and lifestyle, as highlighted in the title of Dot Collard’s book mentioned above. Despite the hardships, obstacles and barely credible racism usually recounted in these books, their subjects display a resilient ability to laugh these off.

8) Considering the personal stories of loss and suffering that are told in these books there is generally a surprising absence of bitterness. The speakers are generally content to present their stories and any accompanying documentary evidence as sufficient accusation of the consequences of a ruthless colonialism.

9) These books are significantly different to perhaps the best-known indigenous autobiographies, such Sally Morgan’s, My Place (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987), and Ruby Langford’s Don’t take Your Love to Town (Penguin, 1988) which are more in the genre of the traditional life story and, of course, have a single author.

10) The role of the publisher tends to be more central and shaping than in traditional western autobiography. Publishers of this genre often bring a commitment to the stories, material and the aims of the enterprise that goes beyond the basics of professional and commercial obligation. They may stress that editing and design need to be sensitive to range of indigenous issues. As the policy of Magabala Books, the publishing pioneer of the genre, puts it:

The actual materials we publish are those that have been assessed and accepted by the publishing house’s Aboriginal Management Committee, taking into account:

1) the fulfilment of our objectives as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander publishers,

2) the intended readership and sales potential and

3) the quality and/or importance of the manuscript.¹

11) Women predominate – as ‘authors’ and as collaborators. Aboriginal men tend to write their own life stories. There are a few male collaborations (interestingly with non-Aboriginal females), such as Bee Hill River Man: Kandalange-Bidi by Jack McPhee with Patricia Konigsberg. (Magabala Books, Broome, 1994) and When You Grow Up by Connie Nungulla McDonald with Jill Finnane. (Magabala Books, Broome, 1996). But the bulk of the titles in this genre are by and about women.

Generating Indigenous Life Histories

This investigation shows how the cultural gatekeepers of publishing respond to new social, political and cultural issues within, in this case, a post-colonial culture. That culture is characterised by a short but devastating history of frontier appropriation, profound culture clash and endemic racism. The consequences for indigenous Australians have been catastrophic in every sense of the term.

Since the 1960s, though, indigenous Australians have been able to claim a space within the politics of Australia. It is a fraught and contested space, but it has nevertheless provided a platform and an opportunity for indigenous issues to be publicly aired, discussed and dealt with. Regardless of the results of such activities, Aboriginal Australians have secured for themselves a place in the Australian polity and psyche that they did not have before the 1970s.

Part of that process has been a need for Aboriginal people to tell their own stories in their own way. As an originally pre-literate society, and one in which literacy is still limited, the medium for telling and transmitting these personal, yet also communal stories, is word of mouth.

In this respect the existence of sound recording technology has been an important feature. While oral histories have been collected and published since the non-specialised use of this technology in the mid-20th century, the medium is an ideal one for a primarily oral people whose storytelling is a central aspect of their spiritual and social lives.

By and large, though, older Aboriginal people (the usual subjects of this genre) do not have access to this technology, or the training – nor perhaps the inclination - to use it. At this point the non-indigenous collaborator becomes important.

Having access to sound recording technology and the skills to use it, these collaborators need to establish a relationship of trust and respect with their subjects, a process that can often take many years of close and/or continual contact. These relationships are often outlined in the Introductions to works in the genre and are clearly the mechanisms by which the life histories reach a reading audience.

¹Magabala Books website, accessed Feb 2005
Once the recordings are made, they must be transcribed and then, in most cases, it seems, the transcriptions are read back to the speakers for accuracy, sensitivity and second thoughts. Once approved, they go to the publisher for editing and production.

In the case of Renee Baker’s book, even the tape recorder was found to be incapable of capturing Renee’s meaning. In an interview she and her collaborator, Bernadette, tell how they opted for an even earlier form of technology to get it right:

“I couldn’t write it on my own, I know that,” says Rene, of the writing process. “Because I wasn’t good at writing at school. So I needed someone to help me. I tried writing, but it didn’t work out. I wasn’t good at writing. So we tried tape, talking into it, telling the story. That didn’t sound right, it felt strange talking into the tape. So the next step was just to talk, and Bernadette wrote down what I said.”

“I sat at the typewriter,” adds Bernadette. “Literally at the typewriter.”

The interviewer went on to add an illuminating comment on this creative relationship:

Bernadette’s role as an author is often one of support. She fleshes out the context of Rene’s telling, and reflects on the white person side of things – the knowledge of law that was deliberately kept untold to Aboriginal people like Rene. ²

The Publishing Process

From a publisher’s commercial point of view, the characteristics of this genre are compelling. There is the exoticism of the topic, the inherent conflict between black and white (even if usually downplayed, as noted above), the author’s quest(s) for their life histories, perhaps parents or other relations and, in recent years, the relevance of the issue to matters of public life and media interest. It all adds up to a potentially marketable genre.

Additionally, the originator of the genre, Magabala Books, also has a philosophical commitment to publishing indigenous material. And that is pretty much all they do publish. Established in Broome, WA, in 1987 Magabala Books policy states that:

Our organisation spreads the seeds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures by recording, publishing and promoting this unique literature in Australia and throughout the world.³

The publisher is also explicit on this approach in its statement of ‘Publishing Policy’:

Publishing Policy

Magabala Books is an Indigenous Australian publishing house with a policy to publish works with major Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander involvement. This requires an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander author, editor or illustrator. We will also consider collaborative works with non-Indigenous authors that have significant contribution from Indigenous person/s. In this instance there must be at least 50% involvement from an Indigenous author.

Copyright to their story is retained by the Indigenous contributor/s.

Magabala Books has a policy of working with Indigenous illustrators only. We recognise the artistic talent and diversity of Indigenous artists and provide opportunities for Indigenous artists to showcase their work through the medium of books.

The term ‘recording’ in this policy statement is something of a revolution as it casts the publisher in a new and additional role to the traditional roles of either commissioning or obtaining a manuscript and bringing it to market in the form of a book. In Australia, at least, publishers have not generally seen themselves as ‘recorders’ or documenters of culture, rather as facilitators for the production and dissemination of any such recordings that happen to have been made by authors. Magabala has arguably expanded the traditional role of the western publisher in response to a perceived need within indigenous and broader Australian society - a response to the awakening of awareness of indigeneity - and also in response to a perceived market niche in the book business.

When Magabala was established as a publisher dedicated to indigenous works there was considerable doubt that it would succeed. Nearly 20 years later its success has proved the critics wrong and also generated a whole new area of the Australian publishing industry on Aboriginal and indigenous works of all kinds, of which the life histories discussed in this paper are a sub-set.

Following quickly on the Magabala example was another West Australian publisher, Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP), a group with a history of involvement in autobiographies indigenous (Sally Morgan’s My Place) and non-indigenous (Albert Facey’s A Fortunate Life). Both these titles are best

³Magabala Books website, accessed Feb 2005
sellers and, in the case of Facey’s book, received extensive and intensive editing from the publisher. As shown in the Appendix, FACP has published a number of indigenous life histories, though they do not include a ‘recording’ function in their philosophy or approach, preferring the more usual means of obtaining manuscripts. Nor do they appear to have stated a policy of 50% involvement by an indigenous person.

**Conclusion**

The development of this new genre of Australian storytelling (is it writing?) and a new publishing paradigm involves the intersection of history, technology, committed individuals and a flexible publisher, willing and able to adapt the processes and priorities of a profoundly western media form to the needs of authors from a culture so different and a recent history so devastating.

As is implicit in Magabala’s 50% indigenous policy, cultural interloping is an issue in these situations. Exactly who is telling these stories that have come into the public arena through the very modern and western format of ‘the book’? Most publishers involved with the genre are generally sensitive to this issue, and often at pains to make a careful delineation of who did what and what relationship to each other. Thus the blurb for *Under Bilyari Tree I Born* reads:

> ‘Anna Vitenbergs and Loreen Brehaut recorded, transcribed and edited this story as directed by Alice Bilari Smith.’

After all is said and done, these are books. They have print on the pages and represent themselves to the world as published pieces of literature. But is it ‘writing’? And if it is ‘writing’, what sort of writing is it that involves the eliciting of oral testimony into an electronic recording device, or occasionally into written notes, from which the speaker’s words are then transcribed, almost inevitably being given at least a preliminary editing during the process. The results of this process are then usually read back to the speaker and any changes then made by the collaborator. This document becomes the script on which the publisher’s editor(s) work, always in close collaboration with the go-between at least, though perhaps not with the speaker who often lives in a very remote spot.

And there are also the other voices that seem to have a hand in shaping these books. These are the families – generally extended – and the traditional communities of the main subject(s)/author(s). Once again, the western notion of the individual author is challenged by the communal nature of the shaping of these books.

The impact of these books on the broader Australian public has yet to be seen. The genre is in a relatively early phase. It may not survive this unless the inevitable commercial realities of Australian publishing can be overcome (small market, large and expensive distances to be crossed, effects of the new Free Trade Agreement with the USA, increasingly fad-driven).

But if it does survive the economic realities, the genre’s qualities of accessibility, humour, human interest and, for non-indigenous people at least, a slight exoticism, may see some of these titles enter school textbook lists as well as circulating widely through the community, especially via the public library system. Hopefully this will have some impact on the negative stereotypes that many white Australians still hold about their first peoples.

**References**


**Appendix**

**Representative Titles in the Genre (PublisheBlurbs)**


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Two Sisters is the unique story of two Walmajari sisters, Ngarta and Jukuna. Born in the Great Sandy Desert as hunters and gatherers they grew up in a time of great upheaval when desert people where leaving their country and heading north to a new life on cattle stations. Jukuna, the elder sister, goes first with her new husband, and the younger sister Ngarta is left behind with a small group of women and children. Disaster strikes, and the tragedy that follows affects both sisters, yet each sister must make a life for herself under conditions for which neither is prepared. Jukuna wrote her life story in her own language, translated here by Eirlys Richards; Ngarta’s story is told by Pat Lowe.


Alice Bilari Smith was born in 1928 on a remote cattle station east of Onslow in the Pilbara region of Western Australia and lived much of her life as part of a hunter-gatherer community. Her delightful and detailed life story brings alive tensions between past and present, indigenous cultural heritage and relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in an immediate and personal manner.


Alice Nannup's battling spirit and individual voice bring her story wonderfully alive whilst at the same time illuminating many aspects of the experience of Aboriginal children taken from their communities in the 1920s and 1930s.


In 1952 in the desert community of Warburton Ranges, four year old Rene was forcibly removed from her mother and taken to a mission 600 kilometres away.

With quiet determination... [the] authors slip beneath the shrill claim and counter-claim of opposing interests and offer sometimes disturbing truths for us to consider: ancient and well-proven laws broken so that a single child might live, children illegally separated from families because of their race and not their welfare, government agencies intent on lies and self-protection.– Kim Scott


As the mother of nine children Dot was immersed in family life. It was not until her sixties that with characteristic courage, she launched her career as a theatre and television actress. Dot Collard is a national treasure. Busted Out Laughing is a book for anyone who believes in family and loves a good belly laugh.

"A funny, sad and whimsical book full of strength and insight. Aunty Dot Collard, who has made an amazing contribution to Aboriginal theatre, tells her story with grace, honesty and courage". Sally Morgan.


With the skill and enthusiasm of a born story-teller, one of the oldest speakers of the Nyamal language recalls the events and places that shaped his life in the Pilbara.


A truly inspirational autobiography of a woman who never stopped working in the harsh conditions of outback Australia; fencing, dogging, roo shooting, being a mum, and raising kids, all in the high hill country of the Pilbara.


Brought up as an orphan at Forrest River Mission in the remote north of Western Australia, Connie became a teacher, a missionary in the Church Army, and a welfare worker. Her autobiography describes her constant search for her place in the world.


Keeping the Wanjinas Fresh is the story of the people of the Wanjinas and their unbroken living cosmology of Lalai - the Dreaming. The power of Lalai was manifest most visibly in the dazzling giant Wanjina designed by Donny Woolagoodja that presided over the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics.

Donny’s father, Sam Woolagoodja, was responsible for repainting the sacred Wanjinas in many of the rock shelters that dot the Kimberly landscape, and was among the first to paint the sacred stories on bark and board to bring the events of Lalai to the children now living far from their homelands.

Includes thirty-two full colour reproductions of paintings.

* As well as male, Stephen Kinnane is also Aboriginal.
About the Author

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Graham Seal was co-founder and Publisher of Black Swan Press (1992-2002) and is currently Chair of the Board of Curtin Publishing.
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