

# CLARE BRADFORD

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## BIOGRAPHY

Clare Bradford is a professor in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her research examines the interplay between children's literature and the social practices it represents and advocates. She has focused on representations of Indigenous peoples and cultures in children's texts, and on Indigenous textuality for children, publishing two books on the topic: *Reading Race: Aboriginality in Australian Children's Literature* (2001), and *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (2007), in addition to many essays. *Unsettling Narratives* is the first comparative study of settler society literatures for children, embracing Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and U.S. texts. A second strand of Bradford's research has examined how post-Cold War children's literature has engaged with political, social, and environmental questions, and is addressed in her book *New World Orders in Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* (2008), co-authored with three Australian colleagues. A third collaborative project looks at Australian children's texts since 1990, exploring their values as they relate to multiculturalism, immigration, and community relations. She was a member of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded team based at the University of Winnipeg that focused on discourses of "home" in Canadian children's literature.

Her books have attracted international prizes: *Reading Race* was awarded the International Research Society for Children's Literature Award in 2003 in addition to the Children's Literature Association Book Award for the best critical work published in 2001. *Unsettling*

*Narratives* received the Children's Literature Association's Honor Award. She is currently president of the International Research Society for Children's Literature.

Clare Bradford grew up in New Zealand and completed her BA at the University of Auckland and her MA and MEd at Victoria University of Wellington. She moved to Australia to undertake her PhD at the University of Sydney and now lives and works in Melbourne.

She was nominated the first Visiting Trudeau Fellow in 2009 and is affiliated with the University of Winnipeg.

#### **ABSTRACT**

When Clare Bradford took an academic position teaching children's literature, she quickly realized that texts for children propose and advocate values, politics, and social practices. She realized, too, that scholars developing new fields of study (like children's literature) must work strategically to build the standing of research in their chosen areas and to demonstrate its significance in addressing contemporary questions. In this lecture, Clare Bradford talks about children's books and what they tell us about the cultures and times in which they are produced, with an emphasis on the politics and aesthetics of Aboriginal children's literature. Using examples of historical and contemporary texts, she shows how books for children address questions about colonization and its consequences, about global politics, and about childhood itself. She reflects on her own experience as a scholar in Australian and Canadian university settings.

LECTURE

# What Children's Literature Tells Us

Simon Fraser University

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I am an accidental scholar of children's literature. When I embarked on my academic career, I fully intended to be a medievalist; my PhD was on the writings of the 14th-century mystical writer Julian of Norwich, and I aspired to work in the *hortus conclusus* of medieval studies, exploring Old and Middle English texts and the distant times and cultures in which they were produced. In 2011, I am a children's literature scholar whose work focuses on how texts for children engage with socio-political ideas, values, and practices. The unlikely trajectory of my career has played out against changes in disciplinary frameworks and in the Australian tertiary education system in which I have worked.

When I sought to become a medievalist after I completed my PhD in the late 1970s, I did so at the wrong time. In my enthusiasm for things medieval, I had failed to notice how very few medievalists were employed in departments of English around Australia. The "arguments about relevance and utilitarianism which define the modern discourse of higher education"<sup>1</sup> have made it difficult

1. Helen Fulton, "Medieval Studies in Australia," *Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association* 50 (2003), 10.

for the humanities to maintain staffing and resources, particularly in specialist and ostensibly arcane fields like medieval studies. Fortunately, I had a fallback position in the form of my previous training and practice as a primary teacher. So I gained a position at Catholic Teachers' College in Sydney, teaching literature to education students. It was at this point that I was asked to teach children's literature, and I very soon found that medieval studies provided me with a fine preparation for this role. It is impossible to understand medieval texts without knowing what was happening when they were produced: to read *Beowulf* is to be introduced to the concepts of honour, heroism, and masculine power that prevailed in Anglo-Saxon Britain; to read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is to observe how the rise of the mercantile class and disaffection with the institutional church jostled with traditions of chivalry and courtly love in the 14th century. In a related way, I read children's texts in relation to the socio-political contexts in which they are produced and received, because literature for children is inescapably implicated in practices of socialization. The audiences of *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales* are vividly present in the assumptions and language of these texts; similarly, children's literature always conjures up the child audiences it implies.

I joined Catholic Teachers' College just before it embarked on a series of amalgamations with other Catholic institutions leading to the formation of the Australian Catholic University. Indeed, every institution where I worked during the 1980s and 1990s underwent the radical transformations associated with the so-called Dawkins reforms, a nation-wide reinvention of the Australian tertiary landscape under the interventionist approach of John Dawkins, Minister for Employment, Education and Training in the Hawke Labor government. In 1983 I gained employment in the Education Department at Victoria College of Advanced Education in Melbourne, which later amalgamated with Deakin University, one of the so-called gumtree universities established in the 1970s. During this period of

widespread institutional change, disciplinary boundaries were also shifting. The field of literature in Australia was no longer dominated by studies of British canonical texts, but addressed Australian texts, reflecting the “turn to theory” that had radically changed research and teaching in the humanities since the 1970s. When the Faculty of Education at Deakin faced funding cuts, the dean decided that children's literature programs were surplus to requirement, together with the staff teaching them. With my colleagues I prepared a successful proposal to move to the Arts Faculty, building a case on the strong undergraduate and graduate student enrolments in children's literature programs, and their disciplinary alignment with literature.

That well-subscribed children's literature programs might have been discontinued with a flourish of the dean's pen is evidence of the marginal position of the field. Children's literature research is relatively new, having developed during the 1970s. It is often regarded as the “immature simple sister to mainstream literature,”<sup>2</sup> lacking in complexity and existing merely to purvey innocent entertainment to its child readers. On the contrary, I would argue that children's texts are complicated and interesting precisely because of the power imbalance that imbues their production and reception: that is, they are produced and mediated by adults for children. Marginal fields of research like children's literature can be precarious places in which to work, but they can also be generative because they require new approaches and novel combinations of ideas.

### **Children's Texts and Politics of Race**

Growing up in one postcolonial society and migrating to another, I have always been keenly interested in the politics of race. Children's texts have much to say about Indigenous peoples and cultures, the colonial past, and relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

2. John Stephens and Roderick McGillis, “Critical Approaches to Children's Literature,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 367.

people in contemporary societies. Historically, most representations of Indigenous people in children's literature have been produced by non-Indigenous authors and illustrators, many of whom draw upon assumptions and stereotypes that are invisible to them because they are cultural givens. For instance, it is common for Indigenous characters in children's books to conform to a limited number of types: the sage, the radical activist, the confused young person torn between cultures. The Australian Aboriginal scholar Mick Dodson says, "our [Indigenous] subjectivities, our aspirations, our ways of seeing and our languages have largely been excluded from the equation, as the colonizing culture plays with itself. It is as if we have been ushered on to a stage to play in a drama where the parts have already been written."<sup>3</sup> In much non-Indigenous writing, accounts of Indigenous cultures are filtered through the perspectives of white culture, so that Indigenous characters are the objects of discourse and not its subjects. For this reason, Indigenous children and young people rarely encounter texts produced within their own cultures. There are notable examples of non-Indigenous texts that treat Indigenous cultures in complex and nuanced ways, and these tend to be produced by people with close and long-standing connections to Indigenous people.

One of the most significant developments in Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian literatures for children since the 1970s has been the emergence of texts by Indigenous authors and artists, often through Indigenous publishing companies, although (given the small proportion of Indigenous to non-Indigenous writers and artists) such texts still comprise a minority of works for children. Because Indigenous producers write out of their experience and cultural knowledge, they offer Indigenous children experiences of

3. Michael Dodson, "The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality," in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Michele Grossman (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 37.

narrative subjectivity by presenting as normal their cultural values. Non-Indigenous children who engage with such narratives are positioned to learn about cultural difference and to realize that many values that they thought to be natural and universal are culturally constructed.

The principal challenge facing me as I researched Indigenous texts was how to approach them as an outsider. I realized that while I can develop an enhanced understanding through research into the cultures and histories that have shaped these texts, a full understanding of their cultural meanings will always elude me. An important aspect of my research, then, is to consider the ethical issues that arise when outsiders read Indigenous texts. I take seriously Patricia Linton's advice, that outsiders should bring to minority texts "a readerly tact that recognises boundaries and respects them."<sup>4</sup>

Two recent Australian Indigenous picture books demonstrate how complex and how political these texts are: *Down the Hole* by Edna Tantjingu Williams and Eileen Wani Wingfield, with illustrations by Kunyi June-Anne McInerney; and Mary Malbunka's *When I Was Little, Like You*. These books address two aspects of Australia's colonial past: the stolen generations, the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families in line with government policy from 1909 to 1969; and the displacement of the people of the Western Desert to the settlement of Papunya from the 1950s to 1970s, when the traditional lands of these desert peoples were appropriated by pastoralists. These two books do not simply tell sad stories about stolen children and destabilized communities. Rather, they foreground cultural survival and continuity by incorporating intergenerational narratives. In this way they accord with the theory of the Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver,

4. Patricia Linton, "Ethical Reading and Resistant Texts," in *Post-Colonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon*, ed. Deborah L. Madsen (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 43.

whose study *That the People Might Live* proposes the concept of “communitism,” a blend of “community” and “activism.”<sup>5</sup> I hasten to say that I am conscious that every Indigenous culture is different, with its own framework of belief and tradition; but my comparative work has made me conscious of all that Indigenous cultures have in common. Indigenous texts for children are, first and foremost, directed toward the communities whose histories and stories they recover. And they are activist texts in that they assert a politics of self-determination. An ethical reading will acknowledge that the events and circumstances these books address are beyond the knowledge and experience of outsiders, that they are informed by particular systems of memory and understanding, and that they tell only what can be publicly told.

Indigenous texts often seem opaque to outsiders because they are built on systems of narrative and knowledge unfamiliar to those outside the cultures where they are produced. My research on ethical reading of minority texts enables me to reach beyond the isolation of my scholarly work to teachers, librarians, and publishers, as well as the many national and international scholars grappling with similar issues and questions. Many students who choose children’s literature studies are training or practising as teachers and librarians. I regard these students as a key demographic in the audiences of children’s literature research because they are charged with selecting and mediating texts to children.

The authors and illustrator of *Down the Hole* have first-hand knowledge of the stolen generations and their families. Both Williams and Wingfield were mothers of light-skinned children who were taken by police and welfare officials. In the author’s notes in her book, Wingfield describes how her children were taken away while her husband was at work. She says, “That’s when they took

5. Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

our kids...[They] just used to rush in and grab kids. I argued to see them. But it broke our hearts.”<sup>6</sup> The book's illustrator, Kunyi June-Anne McInerney, was herself taken from her mother at four or five and renamed, so that she was lost to her family for many years. The cover illustration of *Down the Hole* shows a group of five children clinging together, placed within a circle of light as if discovered by the beam of a torch (illustration 1). The three older children hold the younger two in their arms, but this signifier of connectedness and support is disrupted by the searching eyes of one of the children, who looks anxiously toward the source of light.

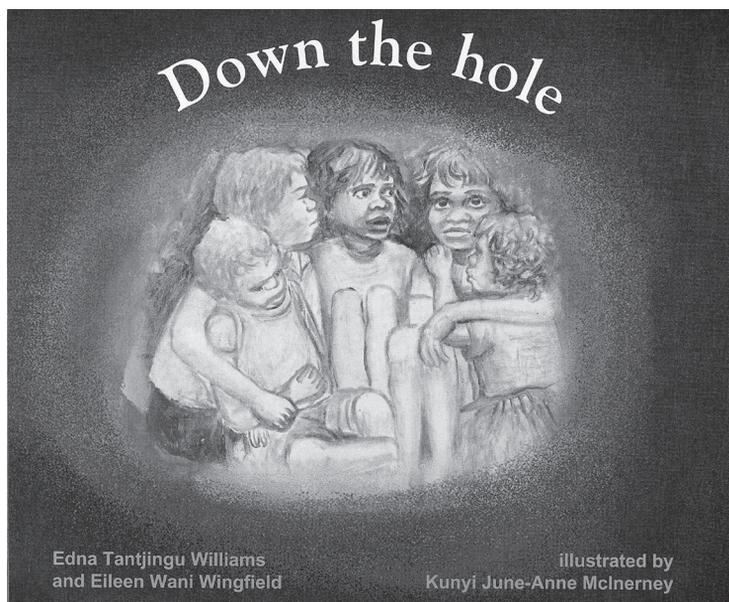


Illustration 1 : Cover of *Down the Hole* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2000).

6. Edna Tantjingu Williams, Eileen Wani Wingfield, and Kunyi June-Anne McInerney, *Down the Hole, Up the Tree, Across the Sandhills...Running from the State and Daisy Bates* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2000), 46. Illustration courtesy of IAD Press, Alice Springs, NT, Australia, [www.iadpress.com](http://www.iadpress.com).

The hole of the book's title, used by the children's parents to conceal them from the authorities, is one of many shafts and tunnels created by opal miners in Coober Pedy, a town in the South Australian outback. Light-skinned children passed entire days in these holes while their parents kept watch for "the State people" and lowered food by ropes when it was safe to do so. The children often slept in the holes until their parents were sure it was safe to bring them out.

In a crucial illustration, the controversial historical figure Daisy Bates is shown disembarking from a train. Bates is a problematic figure in the history of Australian colonialism: she was an amateur ethnologist and self-proclaimed protector of Aborigines and lived in the outback for many years, dressed always in the long skirts, boots, gloves, and veil of Edwardian fashion. The text says that "our old mothers and fathers called out 'Run away, run right away, you fair kids and keep running!'"<sup>7</sup> The figure of Daisy Bates represents the incursion of colonialism, but the hidden children undercut such state power by seeking refuge in country, hiding in underground havens such as the opal mines. The mineshaft is a sign of capitalism, but it is also capable of being suborned into a place of safety, a transformation that Michel de Certeau describes as the "transverse tactics" used by subordinated populations in order to "use, manipulate, and divert"<sup>8</sup> spaces that have been taken over by dominant groups.

The book's final illustration incorporates a reflexive moment as an adult shows a group of children a picture from *Down the Hole* of adults lowering food to their children. Here, memory of the children's escape into country and of their parents' resistance is woven into a triumphant assertion of communal survival and continuity;

7. Williams, Wingfield, and McInerney, *Down the Hole*, 26.

8. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29 and 30.

the text opposite reads “I been still hiding away—and here I am today.”<sup>9</sup>

Like most Australian Indigenous texts, *Down the Hole* is located in a particular tract of land and speaks to the ancient associations of country and kinship. Edna Tantjingu Williams's intentions are described as follows:

Edna...saw this book as a legacy to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And also, her way of setting the record straight about what really happened to Aboriginal people with the “people-that-come-lately”: that is, the rest of us.<sup>10</sup>

The double-facing orientation of this text is clear in these words: its primary audience comprises Indigenous children (“grandchildren and great-grandchildren”), to whom it offers an unusually powerful subject position because its narrative deploys Aboriginal English and is informed by the values and world view of its narrators. The book's other audiences, numerically greater but differently positioned, comprise readers for whom setting, events, and language represent difference from white culture, and who are positioned as outsiders to the conceptual and material world of the book. In her author's note, Eileen Wani Wingfield describes her life as an elder: “I'm...travelling, keeping the culture going and looking after the country.”<sup>11</sup> And indeed Wingfield is looking after the country still: she formed the Senior Aboriginal Women's Council of Coober Pedy with a group of senior Aboriginal women to resist the Australian government's proposal to build a radioactive waste dump near her ancestral country in the South Australian deserts; and she won the Goldman Environmental Prize with another elder in 2003.

In mainstream picture books, narratives are generally presented either through the perspective of a child character or, more

9. Williams, Wingfield, and McInerney, *Down the Hole*, 42.

10. *Ibid.*, 45.

11. *Ibid.*, 46.

frequently, by a neutral external narrator. Indigenous picture books tend to model relationships between elders and children. The opening words of *When I Was Little, Like You* are:

*Uwa ngayuluna wangkanyi ngayuku yara, ngayulu wiima nyina,  
nyuntu nyanganyi.*

I am telling you a story about when I was little, like you.

The presence of Luritja language installs difference, making it clear that those who understand this language comprise the primary audience of the narrative, but making the story accessible to the broader audience of non-Luritja and non-Indigenous children through translation. On the title page, author Mary Malbunka situates her narrative in relation to place and sociality through a map that shows the routes taken by people of the central desert region as they make their way to and from the government settlement camp of Papunya (illustration 2). In an image on the same page, Malbunka shows a group of girls and women embarking on a hunting trip, launching the narrative strand of how women introduce girls to country and to the skills required to live in country. The title page thus talks back to colonial conceptions of space in several ways: its hand-drawn lines gesture toward a personal and embodied experience of place; the colours refer not to an abstract idea of Papunya but to the red and ochre colours of the desert and its wide blue sky; and the image of girls and women foregrounds the connections between kinship and country.

Although Indigenous picture books are often intensely political, they tend to work through understatement and indirection. For instance, consider Malbunka's explanation about how the settlement of Papunya was formed:

I was born at Haasts Bluff in the *karru* (dry creekbed), where the earth is soft and sandy. That was in 1959. My mother and father were living at the old mission settlement at Haasts Bluff when I was a little *pipirri* (child).

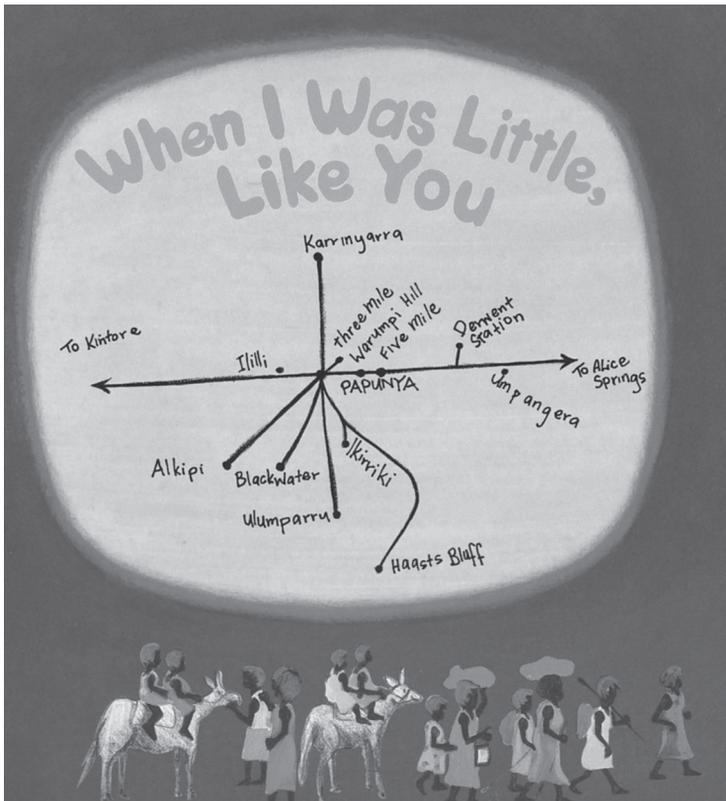


Illustration 2 : Cover of *When I Was Little, Like You* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

When I was about five, the mission boss said my family had to go to the government settlement at Papunya...After the mission at Haasts Bluff, Papunya was really big. There were lots of people living there, people with all different languages: Warlpiri, Luritja, Pintupi, Pitjantjatjara, Arrente.<sup>12</sup>

12. Mary Malbunka, *When I Was Little, Like You* (Crows Nest New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2003), n.p.

Malbunka describes the effects of colonization in a muted style that avoids confronting child readers. Her account of the forced removal of Anangu, or desert groups, relies upon the knowledge of readers who will approach the text with various levels of knowledge and experience. Those with the most intimate knowledge are, of course, those Anangu and their descendants who were wrenched away from country and sacred places to live with strangers.

Rather than representing the desert people as helpless victims of white bureaucracy, Malbunka foregrounds their agency as they resisted and circumvented the rules imposed on them. The children were sent to school, where they were taught English but prohibited from speaking their first languages. The Anangu enjoyed seeing cowboy movies and war movies on an outdoor screen attached to the fence of the preschool. To maintain discipline, those children who had not attended school were forbidden entry to the movies. Malbunka exploits the possibilities of simultaneity in an illustration

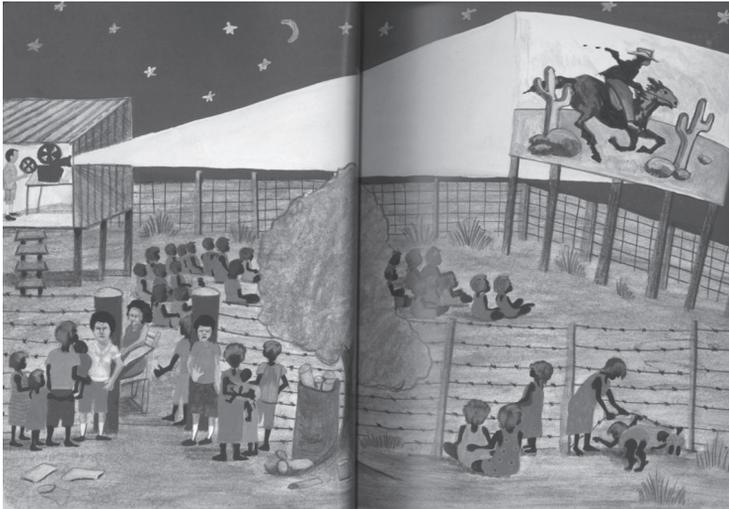


Illustration 3 : Children watching a cowboy movie, *When I Was Little, Like You* (Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

in which white mission staff sternly patrol the entrance to the pre-school, turning away “undeserving” families (illustration 3). At the same time, just around the corner from the officials, a mother is calmly raising the barbed-wire fence to let two children through, while three others wait for their turn. The cowboy scene visible on the screen makes its own comment on the ways in which films depicting the American west resonate with Anangu people. Here, one might say, is a globalizing moment in which cultural difference is elided. Malbunka's depiction of the setting in which Anangu go to the movies is, however, marked by historical and political references: the barbed wire, the institutional setting, and the groups of Anangu seated on the desert sand and distinguished from the white officials who guard the entry.

Such episodes of resistance run alongside Malbunka's stories about her induction into Luritja culture at the hands of her elders. She shows how her uncle Long Jack Philippus, an eminent Papunya artist, drew on the sand the tracks of different animals, teaching the *pipirri* techniques of tracking. Calling on Anangu traditions of dot painting as well as Western representational strategies, Malbunka locates this scene within shapes and colours that gesture toward the Dreaming narratives. The *pilkati* (snake) and the *malu* (kangaroo) in her illustrations are not merely animals but signs of the Ancestors who walked through the land establishing relations between humans and the natural world. Malbunka's paintings signal her kinship relations and her alignment with particular tracts of land, referring to the art of Long Jack and his status as elder and lawman. The meanings of Long Jack's majestic paintings are in the main inaccessible to non-Anangu audiences, who, in the words of the anthropologist Eric Michaels, are likely to perceive “meaningfulness, but not the meaning itself.”<sup>13</sup>

13. Eric Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 57.

Whereas most books for children treat the assumptions and ideologies of white culture as normative, *Down the Hole* and *When I Was Little, Like You* are centred in Indigenous cultures. These texts do not merely celebrate the tactics by which minority groups undermine the strategies of the powerful but are themselves resistant narratives. They look in two directions at once: on the one hand they are directed toward communities and individuals whose histories they celebrate; and on the other hand they invite white children to read differently—to imagine a world where whiteness does not afford a position of privilege and superiority. They promote tactics of Aboriginal resistance as normal, reasonable, and ethical responses to unjust regimes of power. In this way they are deeply political, addressing questions alive in contemporary Australia and, as the current Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggests, in Canada as well.

### **Medievalisms in Children's Literature**

While these two texts directly address the historical and contemporary experience of Indigenous people, many other children's texts work more indirectly, through metaphor and allusion. During my term as Trudeau Fellow I have embarked on an investigation into how medievalist themes, retellings, settings, characters, and allusions function in Australian and Canadian literature for children. An obvious place to begin in Canadian texts is *Anne of Green Gables*, where Anne is so “devoured by secret regret that she had not been born in Camelot”<sup>14</sup> that she attempts a re-enactment of Tennyson's “The Lady of Shalott” in a leaky boat and is saved by Gilbert. In Australian texts, too, the medieval is often mapped onto New World landscapes, notably through the medievalist figure of the fairy. Perhaps because the formation of the Australian publishing industry

14. L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1987), 186.

occurred during a period when fairy narratives were highly popular in Britain, the incidence of fairies in 19th-century and early 20th-century Australian texts is far higher than in Canadian children's texts of the same period.

In Minnie Rowe's 1919 fantasy *Gully Folk*, two children, Betty and Dick, discuss Billy Whiskers, an "old blackfellow"<sup>15</sup> whose grandfather, Wungawarra, taught him magic words that when uttered would summon fairies to protect his people. A key element in Australian fairy books is the problematic of a European genre



Illustration 4 : Wongo and the Princess from *Gully Folk* (Melbourne: Publishing Company, 1919).

15. Minnie I. Rowe, *Gully Folk* (Melbourne: Melbourne Publishing Company, 1919), 20.

introduced into the Australian landscape. As Bill Ashcroft points out, “colonialism brings with it a sense of dislocation between the environment and the imported language [visual imagery] now used to describe it.”<sup>16</sup> This sense of dislocation manifests in the insertion of European fairies into a landscape utterly different from those of the Old World.

As Dick utters the name “Wungawarra,” a tiny fur-covered fairy, Wongo, leaps out of the bush, demanding to know what Dick has done with Wungawarra. A crowd of fairies then materialize, led by a stern-faced princess.

Rowe’s full-colour illustrations of Wongo and the princess suggest an uncanny combination of European and Australian elements (illustration 4). Wongo’s name, his clothing (a tight-fitting garment of fur, laced at the front), and his hair (swept up in a topknot) suggest Nativeness without specifically Aboriginal references, while his face and body are white and his features European. Similarly, the princess, while recognizably a fairy with her dragonfly wings and crown, wears a simple one-shouldered shift made of leaves. Wongo, the princess, and their throng of fairies gather around the two children, hemming them in, pointing at them, scowling, shaking their fists and singing the song:

Where are all the piccanninies?  
 Have you stolen them away?  
 Say they are not gone forever,  
 Say they’ll come again some day!  
 Oh, those happy laughing faces!  
 Oh, those hearts so kind and gay!  
 Where ARE all our piccanninies?  
 Pale-faced children, say, oh, say!<sup>17</sup>

16. Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 153.

17. Rowe, *Gully Folk*, 27. Capitalization in original.

This uncomfortable encounter between the two children and the fairies is as fraught an episode as any in Australian colonial children's literature, evoking Homi Bhabha's treatment of the "unhomely,"<sup>18</sup> a moment or element that inflects the familiar and normal with unease. The bush, formerly the children's playground, is now a place where an experience of the unhomely "creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself...taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror.'"<sup>19</sup> The identification of unhomeliness with an Aboriginal presence in the landscape unsettles the children's very identities as the descendants of pioneers. Betty's grandfather was a gold miner, Dick's a squatter, and it seems that their implication in the disappearance of the black children loads Betty and Dick with a sense of guilty complicity.

The dilemma of colonial children's literature is that it seeks to position non-Indigenous readers as young Australians at home in their world, while simultaneously "managing" the colonial past and its sorry stories of violence and dispossession. In *Gully Folk*, fairies are allocated the task of solving this problem of history. The princess explains to Dick and Betty that the king of fairies sent "thousands and thousands of fairy-tribes"<sup>20</sup> to prepare countries across the world for the advent of humans:

"We were lucky enough to be among those chosen for the land in the South, which, the King told us as a great secret, he loved best of all."

"Australia," said Betty, softly.

"Yes, Australia!" smiled the fairy. "We chose that beautiful name, but we had to whisper it into the ears of white men for a long, long time before we found one who understood."<sup>21</sup>

18. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 141.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Rowe, *Gully Folk*, 48.

21. *Ibid.*, 48, 50.

The fairies are, then, the true Aborigines, a European race that occupied Australia before Aboriginal people arrived, and taught black people bushcraft; even corroborees were based on Aborigines' observation of fairy dances: "When the full moon looked down into the gullies, they would come and watch us at our dances, some of which they would copy at any time of rejoicing, and call it a corroboree."<sup>22</sup> Nineteenth-century British folklorists were preoccupied with theories of origins,<sup>23</sup> postulating that fairytales that survived in folklore comprised the remnants of stories about the dispossessed Aboriginal peoples of Britain. As Andrew McCann notes, nostalgic imaginings of "a people with an intimate, ancestral relationship to place seem to circulate at the very moment that 'belonging', in this fundamental sense, has been disrupted or rendered problematic by processes of urbanization, migration and alienation."<sup>24</sup> Rowe's fairies afford just such a fantasy of belonging, asserting their prior occupation of Australia and so displacing Aborigines, who are then treated as merely the first of the migratory peoples to come to "the land in the South."

The fairies, Rowe points out, are responsible for the naming of Australia, but also for the fatal inferiority of Aboriginal people, and here the narrative invokes 19th-century theories about a hierarchy of races in which Aborigines occupy the lowest rung. The princess explains, "We are to blame...for not teaching [black people] more quickly. While the fairies in other lands were urging their people on as quickly as possible, we were content for ours to remain like little

22. *Ibid.*, 53.

23. Carole Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Conscientiousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Nicola Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

24. Andrew McCann, *Marcus Clarke's Bohemia: Literature and Modernity in Colonial Melbourne* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 2.

children."<sup>25</sup> The doctrine of Social Darwinism is reasserted, and the moment of unhomeliness passes; Betty begs the princess to "forgive the white men, and love the white children as you do the black piccaninnies!"<sup>26</sup> whereupon the fairies sing a song that reverses their earlier lament:

As long as the children need us,  
We'll stay in each gully and glade,  
For the fairies have lived for the children  
Since the time when the world was made.  
We'll pine no more for our lost ones,  
But joyously dance and sing;  
If we can't have BLACK piccaninnies,  
Then WHITE are the next best thing.<sup>27</sup>

If the fickleness of the fairies of *Gully Folk* sounds a warning about how long the white piccaninnies will remain the next best thing, the text provides enough cues to reassure its readers that they are protected by their superior capacity to move beyond childhood and into an imagined adulthood, inserted into the landscape as the country's new Natives blessed and authorized by the fairies who are the true indigenes of Australia.

Fairies continue to be put to work in texts that engage with contemporary politics. Bob Graham's much-awarded picture books generally thematize suburban life and family relationships. His 2002 book *Jethro Byrde Fairy Child* features a family living in a block of flats just over the fence from a petrol station. Annabelle is keen on fairies, and one day she finds one, a boy called Jethro Byrde, whose father, Orrin, has made an emergency landing, planting the family's hamburger van among the weeds in the service station driveway, just where Annabelle can slip through a broken paling:

25. Rowe, *Gully Folk*, 54.

26. *Ibid.*, 75.

27. *Ibid.* Capitalization in original.

There she met a boy—as big as her finger. His wings shivered in the breeze. “Who are you?” she said.

He hitched up his jeans, flew onto a leaf and wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve. “Jethro,” he said. “Jethro Byrde...I’m a *Fairy Child*.”<sup>28</sup>

With their nomadic lifestyle and their fondness for fiddle-playing and dancing, Jethro and his family might be Romani; they call themselves Travellers. They are invisible to Annabelle’s parents, who good-naturedly pretend that they can see Jethro and serve “fairy cakes and camomile tea in fairy cups.” Graham here adopts a narrative strategy common in picture books, where child readers are positioned to know what adult characters do not, constructed as knowing subjects in control of the narrative. Given that picture books are commonly mediated to young children by parents or others, this disjunction of knowledge adds its own pleasure to the reading context:

“Mummy and Daddy, this is Jethro Byrde. He’s a Fairy Child, and his family have come to tea,” said Annabelle.

“We must make them welcome, *and* make them tea,” said Mum.

But she was looking the wrong way.

“Can you see Jethro, Daddy?” Annabelle asked.

“I ... I think I can, Annie. I think he’s ... ON THE FENCE?”<sup>29</sup>

When the fairies leave to make hamburgers at the Fairy Travellers’ Picnic, they leave Annabelle a keepsake in the form of a watch big enough for her finger, which keeps “fairy time.” That night, from her bedroom, Annabelle sees a procession of fairies riding in the moonlight. The angle of the penultimate illustration, looking up from the service station and toward the night sky, sets the

28. Bob Graham, *Jethro Byrde, Fairy Child* (London: Walker Books, 2002), n.p.

29. *Ibid.* Capitalization in original.

Travellers against the mundane everyday scene of graffiti and apartment blocks, closing with Annabelle asleep, “their busy chattering and the buzzing of their wings and their faraway music”<sup>30</sup> filling her dreams.

Graham created *Jethro Byrde* against the backdrop of the Tampa affair in 2001, when the Howard government refused to allow a Norwegian freighter to land in Australia with 438 Afghani refugees who had been rescued from a sinking Indonesian vessel. Following the Tampa affair and during the remainder of the Howard government's period of office, a substantial number of refugee narratives for children were published in Australia, including picture books intended for young children. *Jethro Byrde* is one of a small number of picture books that approaches the topic of asylum seekers through fantasy rather than realist narratives. In line with Graham's usual approach, the narrative filters large-scale concerns through the everyday and the ordinary.

The fairies of *Jethro Byrde* are strangers, invisible to the adult world. The narrative may seem to hinge upon the familiar opposition between adults who do not see fairies and children who do, but the ideological burden of this book is more subtle than this. As a text directed to adults as well as the children they read to, it suggests a distinction between children who welcome strangers and adults who do not recognize them as being like themselves. Working backward from the narrative to the book's epigraph, it is clear that Graham's fairies can also be read as angels: “Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: For thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”<sup>31</sup> The epigraph will, of course, be inaccessible to most of the young children implied by the text. Like many picture books, *Jethro Byrde* performs a double act, implying plural readerships with various levels of textual experience. When Annabelle's

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

father, pretending to see Jethro, says, “I think he’s... ON THE FENCE,” this phrase echoes the debates over the political and moral implications of the Tampa episode that raged at the time. Although the fairies in *Jethro Byrde* are outsiders to the world of humans, the narrative focuses not so much on their difference as on the extent to which they are recognized as “like us.”

So, what does children’s literature tell us? Texts for children are highly responsive to socio-political events and are implicated in shaping the values of children and young people. Such texts are always informed by the assumptions and values of their producers, so that to examine children’s texts is to discern what adults regard as desirable possibilities or negative models of human behaviour. Texts for youth audiences address immediate and pressing cultural concerns, including race relations, globalization, ecological questions, and concepts of sexuality. Research in children’s literature is, I think, not so much about themes or content but about how texts position their implied readers—how these texts imagine children and their anxieties and desires—and what they propose to their readers about individuals, human relationships, and societies. The Indigenous texts I considered, *Down the Hole* and *When I Was Little, Like You*, introduce readers to ugly and painful episodes in Australian history. At the same time they advocate solidarity and assert the enduring values of Indigenous societies, founded upon kinship, country and the law handed down by the Ancestors. The 1919 fantasy *Gully Folk* points to the faultlines that trouble settler society in Australia, the legacy of the forced appropriation of land and displacement of Indigenous peoples, while Bob Graham’s *Jethro Byrde* draws on the medievalist trope of the fairy to engage with contemporary politics around the troubled topic of refugees and Australian citizenship.

I began this discussion by remarking on the unlikely trajectory of my academic career. The most unexpected twist for me has been the great privilege of receiving a Trudeau Fellowship. The Foundation’s

funding of Fellows, Scholars, and Mentors testifies to the high value that it places on humanities and social science research. At a time when scholars in these fields often struggle to maintain a sense of purposefulness, the Trudeau Foundation insists that scholarship and creative work contribute in real and tangible ways to improving the social and cultural fabric. Children's literature research, like the texts it studies, addresses crucial contemporary issues. By drawing attention to how stories and language shape and direct readers' perceptions and responses, it offers critical perspectives and modes of reading valuable to those who produce children's texts, those who mediate them to children, and the children who engage with them.