



MACQUARIE PEN
ANTHOLOGY of
ABORIGINAL
LITERATURE
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From the Teaching Guide for the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* at www.macquariepenanthology.com.au

Aboriginal Children's Literature: More than just pretty pictures

Anita Heiss

There is far more to Aboriginal-authored children's books than telling the expected Dreaming or creation stories through 'just words' and brightly coloured artwork. Rather, in recent years books in this genre have raised the bar in terms of this literature's cultural worth, with Aboriginal titles being increasingly defined by their social, cultural, historical and political value. Many titles coming out of Indigenous-specific publishing houses, like Magabala Books in Broome and IAD Press in Alice Springs, serve to define and demonstrate the roles and responsibilities of Aboriginal children's literature. These books explore aspects of Australian history and society not regularly covered in other areas of Australian children's book publishing or in the education system. Stories about Aboriginal identity written by young Aboriginal authors, books that provide young readers with moral lessons, and stories that not only entertain and engage young readers but also carry the cultural role of documenting language are increasingly highlighting the difference between mainstream children's books, which may have entertainment value but no determination or responsibility to provide role-model characters or storylines with greater social purpose, and those written by Aboriginal people. I want to explore here how some of these Aboriginal-authored titles, which local and personal histories including complex stories that deal with the Stolen Generations, engage and educate young readers.

The traditional story time in infant schools remains an important part of the Australian educational curriculum. A strategic way to introduce young Australians -black and white- to aspects of Aboriginal society they may not get anywhere else is to engage a captive young audience with a well-written and enthusiastically read page-turning story, with colourful illustrations. It is important to note at the outset, however, that these books have a broad-ranging audience. Readers interested in Indigenous stories, culture, language and voice are not limited by age, gender, class or geography.

Excerpt from:

Anita Heiss, 'Aboriginal Children's Literature: More than just pretty pictures' in *Just Words? Australian authors writing for justice*, edited by Bernadette Brennan, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2008, p. 102-103.

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