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OF SONGS AND STORIES

(Or You're history! Your dreaming?)

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'Stories are the way to feel you belong' – Boori Monty Pryor.

I love that quote. It's carved into the great white plaques that edge the dome inside the State Library of Victoria. On hot summer afternoons of late, I've been hiding out in the domed reading room, compulsively browsing the Australiana collection and every time I gaze up at Pryor's quote I'm struck by its simple, forceful truth.

The stories we tell ourselves, and our children, help us to define our culture and our sense of belonging. Indigenous cultures have always understood that stories help children make connection to the landscape and their community. Indigenous histories are rich in their sense of place. Every landscape is permeated with story. Every aspect of a physical place is vested with story in a way that fosters belonging, that binds the community to the land and the people to each other. Without stories to construct our place in the world, how can we make our way in it?

Australians, like many immigrant cultures, feel a complicated ambivalence about their sense of place in their homeland. Several weeks ago, I drove my twenty-year-old daughter out to Tullamarine airport. She flew off to France for a semester of study at the Sorbonne. After Christmas, I'll farewell my eldest stepdaughter who is heading to Glasgow School of Art. Half their social group are leaving the country, for work, for study or for sheer adventure. The compulsory OS trip is a young Australian's right of passage. Many of these kids are sixth-generation Australians and yet the lure of Europe is compelling for them. I know that these journeys are important, enriching experiences and when they come home, they'll have a more powerful understanding of their place in the world. But why is it that you never know how Australian you are until you leave Australia? Maybe because we have never been very good at understanding our own culture, we can only find self-definition by measuring ourselves against others. Or maybe the old world still holds us in its thrall. Its siren song continuously cries out to generation after generation of Australian youth. After two hundred years, have we still not vested enough of ourselves in this land to make the country sing to us? Maybe we're just not listening.

As a voracious child reader, I spent countless hours of my childhood living in imaginary landscapes. When I first travelled to England, I felt an immediate sense of connection with both the cities and the landscape. I had a wealth of story to connect me to the place. In America, thanks to Mark Twain, I felt a stronger sense of connection with the Mississippi than I ever had to the Murray River. These days, countless Australian children spend much of their imaginative life in Hogwarts, the Discworld or Deltora. Fantasy can be a fantastic medium for conveying metaphorical truth, for offering all those necessary escapes from the humdrum of day-to-day existence but sometimes I wonder if it doesn't interfere with our ability to develop a sense of belonging. Fantasy books are almost exclusively set in European or pseudo-European landscapes. It further erodes children's confidence that any good stories grow out of this land. Ask your average Australian child what sort of history they're interested in and invariably they'll answer, Medieval. Finding out more about knights and castles and the old world is a must. Some more daring children might answer Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome or even the American Civil War. Few will tell you they can't wait to learn more about Australian history.

Many contemporary works of realist children fiction suffer from a similar problem in that they are set in amorphous, 'universal' landscapes which don't facilitate connection to any landscape or distinctive culture. The emotional content and the action are considered infinitely more important than its physical setting. Sometimes I wonder if this isn't just another manifestation of cultural cringe. A serious fear among many authors is that if their work is considered too parochial, it won't sell outside Australia.

Perhaps our sense of disconnection from our own history is intensifying as we become increasingly urbanised. Yet urban landscapes can be just as vested in spirit as the wide-open places. The Irish philosopher, John O'Donohue, in writing about the ruins that cover the Irish countryside, has a beautiful explanation of how human spirit impacts on any environment.

'The life and passion of a person leaves an imprint on the ether of a place. Love does not remain within the heart. It flows out to build secret tabernacles in a landscape.'

To tell stories that uncover the 'secret tabernacles' in the Australian landscape, both urban and rural, is a great challenge. It means connecting with the history of your people and their land. It's a task that Australians have always felt ambivalent about. As an immigrant nation, we love to forget. Immigrant nations, by their very nature, are in a continuous escape from the past. The deepest ambition of any immigrant is to make a better future for their children. Immigrant cultures are spawned by grief and loss. The way the new worlds were settled disrupted patterns of passing on histories. For children of the wind, whose ancestors were swept here by the storms of history, our links to the past are fragile. And yet, there are so many gripping stories that encompass the departure from the old world, the journey to this land and the long process of building a new life in a strange new world. It's surprising that there isn't a stronger oral tradition in the passing on of these formative stories. These are our first stories of belonging.

There is a constant tension in the very heart of our culture. No one leaves their birthplace without a measure of mixed emotion so our links with the old world can be both precious and fraught. New immigrants are always looking forward, looking for a better life for their children, hoping that the stories of their children's lives will be serene and stable and not burdened by the grief of the old world. Our culture is based on hope. The process of communicating stories across generations and coming to terms with our place in the landscape is incredibly complex. But whether a story is told or whether it lies hidden behind the veil of time, its existence, its silent influence, reaches long tentacles into our lives.

Four years ago I began to formulate an idea for a series of novels that would give me an opportunity to write some of these complicated stories of exodus. I must admit, I had no idea when I started upon the project just how consuming it would become. The ties that bound the stories to each other and to the history of the settlement of Australia seemed to reach out in so many directions. I came to understand that some stories are too painful to be passed on from one generation to the next and need the filter of time before they can be told.

In writing the *Children of the Wind* series, it has been the complexity of the project that has sustained me across the length of time and the volume of research the novels have entailed. The series consists of four inter-linked novels set at fifty year intervals, starting in 1850 with *Bridie's Fire*. Between 1848 and 1850, over four thousand orphaned girls were taken from workhouses across Ireland and shipped to Australia to make new lives for themselves. Their stories have been swept up into the whirlwind of history but the echoes of their lives are with us still. *Bridie's Fire* was my attempt to bring those girls back to life so a wider audience than their ancestors could know their stories, so kids could know of their courage and their strength and how these gutsy children struggled to belong here.

Like the asylum seekers of today, the Irish girls of 1850 were not welcomed in their new land. They were scorned and often vilified. In 2002, John Howard's response to the 'Children Overboard' debacle - 'these are not the sort of people we want in Australia' - echoed loudly to anyone familiar with the plight of the famine orphans. In April 1850 the editor of the *Argus* newspaper wrote of the orphan girls 'they are the most stupid, the most ignorant, the most useless, and the most unmanageable set of beings that ever cursed a country by their presence.' Many of the objections to the famine victims revolved around their refugee status, their religion, and their perceived lack of useful skills. Much of the rhetoric will be familiar to anyone who has followed the contemporary debate about refugees.

Over thirty thousand ancestors of these girls are now fifth and sixth generation Australians yet most of them are not aware of the fact. Like holocaust survivors, many of the famine victims found it too painful to share their history with their children. They put their past behind them and built whole, new lives.

Children of the Wind is not a family saga. Each of the first three books in the series is about a separate child immigrant, each with their own burden of grief and hope, who battle to find their place in their new country. *Becoming Billy Dare* is set in 1900 and tracks the adventures of Paddy Delaney from a Dublin seminary to a touring theatre troupe in the Australian bush. *A Prayer for Blue Delaney* focuses on Colm McCabe, one of the Children of Empire immigrants in the post-second world war era. The last book is about a girl named *Maeve Lee Kwong*, a contemporary teenager of mixed Chinese-Australian-Irish ancestry who is heir to the rich and complex histories that preceded her story. An elderly person who was the child immigrant in the earlier novel mentors each of the child protagonists in their new country. Moving outside the confines of family histories gave me the opportunity to widen the scope of the novels.

I settled on the Irish as the culture best suited to my purposes in constructing a series about an immigrant nation because for hundreds of years, the Irish have been the most successful immigrants in the world. Although the current population of Ireland is only five million, seventy million people around the world are Irish by descent. Australia, as much as anywhere, is deeply riddled with Irish immigrant culture. Current estimates indicate at least one third of the Australian population have an Irish ancestor. Irish traditions still have a powerful hold on our culture from their influence on early Australian politics, to the notion of a 'fair go', the cultural impact of Irish music, pub culture and our wide streak of self-effacing good humour.

A common criticism of historical fiction for children is that it is driven by pedagogic intent. Some interpret historical fiction as an educationalist slight of hand; stuffing history down children's throats, sugar coating the bitter pill of pedantic factual information to make palatable what is in essence dull. Children read to know the world and to discover their place in it as much as to be entertained. Historical fiction can meet all these needs. For the author, it lends the opportunity to explore all the most important aspects of story-telling and still come up with a really good, action-packed yarn.

History isn't simply about what happened 'way back then'. It is so much more immediate. It is about what is happening right now and how and why we have become the people we are. In the blink of an eye, the future is upon us and the moment we were in, is history.

PL Travers was an Australian author whose life trajectory speaks legion about Australian culture. The daughter of an Irish immigrant raised in rural Australia, she went to Ireland to find her creative voice. There's no small irony in the fact that her *Mary Poppins* books are considered classic British children's fiction. In her 1967 essay entitled *Only Connect*, she wrote that great fiction aspires 'to find the human key to the inhuman world about us; to connect the individual with the community, the known with the unknown; to relate the past to the present and both to the future.' Everyone, adult and child, craves connection to each other and the world around them.

If we want our children to connect to Australia and hear the song of this land, to have it ring true for them, we have to give them more stories about how we all came to be here and why we belong to this land. Only then, will they be able to see the 'secret tabernacles' in our landscapes, hear its voice, and truly discover a sense of belonging.