Gadi Mirrabooka: Australian Aboriginal Tales from the Dreaming

Helen F. McKay, Editor

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I dedicate this book to the Australian Aboriginal nations, whose stories from the Dreaming bestow wisdom and spiritual values that can inspire and enrich all of our lives.

Helen F. McKay
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Helen McKay
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Introduction

_Gadi Mirrabooka_, which means “below the Southern Cross,” contains thirty-three Dreaming stories from the Australian Aboriginal culture, recognized as the oldest continuous culture on Earth. The stories in this collection, unlike many previous collections of Aboriginal stories, are told by Aboriginal storyteller custodians.

In the past, people have gathered, plundered, and published books of Aboriginal stories, regardless of whether they were secret stories for use in initiation rites or intended for public use. This was usually done without first seeking permission to use them. In many cases, a number of these stories were altered—or sanitized—to suit the prevailing sensitivities and values of the era. These acts deeply offended the Aboriginal people.

The storytellers who have shared stories for _Gadi Mirrabooka_ are all respected Aboriginal cultural educators who use their knowledge to educate their younger generations as well as the wider Australian community. The stories have not been altered or sanitized for specific audiences but are authentic oral stories, passed down through many generations. All have been approved for public telling.

The Dreamtime, the period of creation before time as we know it existed, is known to the Aboriginal people as the Dreaming, where the very essence of human nature came to be understood. The lessons of this period of enlightenment, the ability to live in peace and harmony with all around us, are encapsulated within the Dreaming and passed on to the next generation in the oral tradition.

_Dreamtime_ is a word first used by an anthropologist in the early 1900s to define what he saw as a religion. He used this word to describe the all-encompassing mystical period of Aboriginal beginning. However, the Aboriginal people did not and do not worship any single deity or other god. They built no monoliths, memorials, or idols, nor did they have an organized religion. They lived by the lores of the various creators and ancestral spirits of the diverse landscapes, the sky, the creatures, and the plants of Australia.

The art, stories, songs, and dances became well known as part of the Dreamtime, but they are still little understood and very hard to explain. The Dreamtime is part of the oral tradition and is only one aspect of the very complex spiritual belief system.

The Dreamtime stories are the verbal form of the spiritual Dreaming, which comprises:

- **Art**: the visual form
- **Customs**: the practical form
- **Music**: the acoustic form
- **Totems**: the spiritual form
Lore: the cultural form
Lands: the physical form

Altogether, these aspects form an all-encompassing, mystical whole. Over the course of the past 200 years, since the onset of colonization, non-indigenous people have perceived these art forms as separate entities rather than as part of a whole. The result has been a fragmented overview of the culture.

The stories of the Dreaming are more than myths, legends, fables, parables, or quaint tales. They are definitely not fairytales for the amusement of children. Down through generations, the Aboriginal people’s stories, told but never written down, were the oral textbooks of their accumulated knowledge, spirituality, and wisdom, from when time began.

The structure and form of a traditional Dreaming story is quite unique and cannot easily be copied. An oral Dreaming story of ten minutes’ length can cover several topics and subject matters and be suitable for all age groups. They are structured with valuable lessons for children or for bringing a renewed understanding to older people.

Twenty or more lessons can be found in one story, teaching such topics and subject matters as

- The spiritual belief system,
- Customs,
- Animal behavior and psychology,
- Land maps of the region,
- Hunting and gathering skills,
- Cultural norms,
- Moral behaviors,
- Survival skills, and
- Food resources.

For example, the stories “Brolga” (number 23) and “First Platypus” (number 10) are excellent examples of “stranger danger,” and “Murray Cod” (number 4) is a “creation map” story.

Every genre of storytelling and hundreds of categories are used in the Dreaming stories, such as

- Babies’, older children’s, and adult stories;
- Women’s stories, both public and secret;
- Men’s stories, both public and secret;
- Love, comedy, tragedy, and horror stories;
- Parables and sacred stories, both public and secret; and
- Mystical stories.

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The Dreaming stories are not specifically related to time, because time was not important for the story to become part of the oral tradition. The important issue was the event that occurred and affected the people, the land, and the culture.

Research into animals, described in traditional Dreaming stories, corroborates the existence of these creatures of the Creation and megafauna, which existed in other periods of world history. Many of these animals are now extinct, but their remains have been discovered by archaeologists. Some examples of these Dreaming stories are

- Stories about giant lizards of the dinosaur period,
- The story about the birth of the platypus at least 1 million years ago,
- Stories about giant kangaroos that lived at least 15,000 years ago,
- The Dreaming story about the Devil Dingo, which lived at least 5,000 years ago,
- Stories about the invention of a weapon, the boomerang, at least 15,000 to 25,000 years ago,
- The Dreaming story about how death came into the world, and
- The Dreaming story about the birth of the sun.

Many of the Dreaming stories refer to an Aboriginal group’s creation time, for example, “Rainbow Serpent Dreaming” or “Honey Ant Dreaming” (not in this book). Their ancestor spirits arrived here at the time of creation in human and animal spirit form and are now encapsulated in the stories of the Dreaming associated with each particular group of people.

New Dreaming stories are being continually added to those already in existence. Stories of islands pushed along by clouds were about the sailing ships of the 1700s, with their strange men from across the seas. The Aboriginal people perceived them as ghosts or evil spirits, but they were actually the colonists who arrived between 1788 and the 1950s.

Tales abounded of hoofed, four-footed, monstrous creatures with two heads that stank like bunyips (water demons) and defiled nature: men on horses. Stories were told of other objects that could only be described by the sounds they made. There is no word in any Aboriginal language that could describe such a creature. They were known as “chuggasshhhh-chuggasshhhh” and were the early paddle steamers on the Murray River. The stories of the “flying ships” of sixty years ago—the airplanes of the 1940s—totally amazed and terrified the people of the interior, who had never seen them.

The most recent Dreaming stories are of “the black cloud of Maralinga,” the atomic testing grounds of the 1950s, “deaths in custody,” and “removed or stolen children,” a time better known to the Aboriginal people as the Screamtime, Nightmare period of history. (These stories are not included in this book because of the complex nature of issues.)

The lessons in a Dreaming story are not taught directly but are assimilated by repetition. Understanding of the story is acquired from life experiences as a person grows to maturity. When the time comes for that person to keep the oral tradition alive by passing the stories on in their entirety to the next generation, it can be done correctly and without distortion.

In the retelling of a Dreaming story, the traditional Aboriginal oral storyteller can use virtually every form of theatre known to pass on the culture, unlike the Irish Seanachie, who just sits and tells the story. This telling can take the form of a solo performer or troupes, using music, song, or simply telling without aids.

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In addition, the story may be told in plays, pantomime, dances, and the visual art forms, which often accompany the telling. Facial expressions, hand movements, vocal variety, and mime—both vocal and physical—were, and still are, very important in the presentation of a Dreaming story. There are strict requirements for a traditional storyteller, imposed by the elders, regarding an individual’s personal knowledge of cultural laws and custodianship.

Symbolic languages, such as the map-like dot pictures and cave paintings and carvings, were used throughout Aboriginal Australia to record information. A written language was never developed or used. There is no universal Aboriginal language; there are approximately 700 Aboriginal tribal groups, each with its own dialect. On top of this, there are regional languages common to many groups within a region, such as the Murray River basin region or Kimberley.

According to the land regions and the habitat of the creatures being described in a story, there are as many different versions of a core story as there are tribes. These may differ in that the creatures in the story may be changed to fit the regional landscape of swamps, rivers, mountains, plains, or coastal land areas.

Since time began, the Aboriginal people have been in Australia. The original people lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle based on their oral tradition and existence as hunters and gatherers, trading or bartering their excess produce. Wherever these groups gathered, whether for trade or tribal ceremonies, stories were exchanged and information offered about the presence of animals for hunting, as well as about other food sources.

The Aboriginal people do not believe in land ownership; rather, they see themselves as custodians of the land mass known as Australia. They believe the time has now come for the Aboriginal people, who have survived many changes, both natural and human-made, to share not only their culture but also the wisdom and experience of the Dreaming. The elders have given permission for stories, including some previously secret stories from the Dreaming, to be disseminated.

Through these stories, which teach us to care for the land and one another, we catch glimpses of the great diversity within Australia—of its people, animals, and landforms. The stories in this book offer a comprehensive glimpse of the Dreamtime.

Included in this book are stories from many vastly different regions of Australia. There are stories of the Creation, spirits, diverse languages, and, of course, the constellations, the stars of the Southern Cross and Milky Way. There are creation stories, animal stories, map stories, a space story, love stories, heroic stories (some with strong moral values), and stories that warn of dangers. They have been collected from all over Australia to allow the reader to understand more about the oldest continuous living culture on Earth. The more often you read them, the better you will understand the messages they contain.

Stories from the Dreaming, or the First Time, are the cultural property of the Australian Aborigines. To pass them on without first obtaining permission from the traditional owners would, in those owners’ eyes, be stealing. If you find an Aboriginal story that is not in this book, you should first identify its source and try to obtain permission to tell it. We have received permission from the traditional owners for the Aboriginal contributors to share all the stories in this collection. Read each of them once for enjoyment, a second time for information, and a third time for understanding of the values and lessons it carries.
Part 1

Australia and the Aboriginal People
Overview of Australia

Geography: The Land

Australia—The Land Down Under—is an ancient island continent, isolated from other continents by vast expanses of ocean. It is slightly smaller than the United States. The mainland of Australia is situated between latitudes 10 degrees south and 44 degrees south of the equator and longitudes 11,309’E in West Australia and 15,339’E in New South Wales. The continent of Australia spans three time zones. It is one of the few countries in the world to use a half-hour split time.

The land is home to some of the oldest living flora, including such recently rediscovered plants as the Wollemi pine, which has a fossil line stretching back more than 90 million years, and the cycads, food of the dinosaurs. Because it is an island, Australia is also home to some of the most unique animals in the world.

Current thinking by scientists is that, to the south, the island continent was originally part of Gondwanaland, which linked South America, Antarctica, and Madagascar. It is believed to have been part of a supercontinent, Sahul, to the north, which linked Australia, Tasmania, and New Guinea during the Ice Ages. Much of the land to the south was covered by glaciers, which gradually retreated and melted as the last Ice Age came to an end.

Volcanic activity occurred in many places along the eastern seaboard and in some northern areas of Western Australia. Fossilized rocks have been discovered made up of many layers of compacted volcanic ash. They show evidence of the existence of the people, fauna, and flora of their period. When split open, many have revealed Aboriginal tools and other artifacts, land animal skeletons, and sea creatures.

Evidence of recurrent showers of meteorites from outer space exists in the gigantic Henbury Meteorite Craters they left in the Northern Territory, where rocks (some of them quite huge) crashed into the Earth’s crust, transforming the landscape.

For many years, anthropologists believed that a migration to Australia from the north took place around 50,000 years ago, through the islands of Borneo, Sumatra, and Java. During that Ice Age, these islands were part of Asia and were separated by as little as 100 to 160 kilometers (62.5 to 100 miles) from mainland Australia.

Large groups of dark-skinned people are believed to have made their way by island hopping, to the Great Southern Land during one of the four major glacial periods. This is some of the earliest evidence of sea travel by prehistoric humans.
Scientists believe that these groups of people gradually moved inland, settling for a while before moving on down the coastlines. Their instinct for survival helped them overcome the many challenges they faced from the forces of nature when droughts, fires, violent storms, and floods ravaged the land.

It is believed that the earliest groups were nomads, who traveled along the western and eastern coastal fringes as they followed food sources. Some of these people are believed to have traveled far to the south, crossing to Tasmania by way of an Ice Age bridge that attached the island to the mainland continent.

Archaeologists believe that global warming that took place at the end of the Ice Age (about 25,000 years ago) caused sea levels to rise an estimated 150 to 200 meters (approximately 500 to 665 feet) and flood low-lying land areas, separating mainland Australia from Tasmania in the south and New Guinea in the north.

These theories are yet to be proven conclusively. Even where some Dreamtime stories tell of great sea journeys and new beginnings, they could also be retelling of evacuations brought about by massive land changes that occurred at the end of the Ice Ages.

The Aboriginal people have their own beliefs about the history of their lands. Many believe that their ancestors originated in Australia, as evidenced by many of their stories from the Dreaming, which is the oral history of the Aboriginal people. These Dreamtime stories tell of occurrences during the Great Creation in timeless ages beyond our understanding.

When we look at these stories as part of the Aboriginal cultural education system, the oral tradition seems to be far more accurate than any written form of history. Some of these stories that contain sacred, “secret” knowledge about their origins are held by a handful of carefully selected tribal custodians, the storytellers, and are passed on to the people on ceremonial occasions.

Following the strict requirements of a traditional storyteller imposed by the elders, there is no “cut” and “edit” in the oral system. Consequently, the Aboriginal people understand much about their prehistory and have developed a strong connection to their land. The information in many of these stories is now being researched and is proving to be essentially correct.

It is interesting to see that recent carbon dating studies of early Aboriginal sites being excavated by modern archaeologists are also beginning to suggest that the Aborigines’ Australian origins were much earlier than was previously thought. Discoveries in some of the caves of northern Australia show that human occupation took place during the Pleistocene period (between 2.5 million and 11,000 years ago). Carbon dating, thermo-luminescence, and other scientific studies are now being conducted on fossilized wasp nests found on some of the early cave paintings in the north of Western Australia to determine with accuracy the age of these structures.

**The Geographic Regions**

The two major factors in Aboriginal settlement of Australia are the land structure and the climate. Australia is a huge continent, made up of many vastly different regions:

- The coastal fringes, where most of the Aboriginal population settled;
- The river valleys, such as the Murray-Darling and Carpentaria basins, also heavily populated;
• Five major deserts (Gibson Desert, Great Sandy Desert, Great Victorian Desert, Tanami Desert, and Simpson Desert);
• The great plains, eastern and western coastal plains, and Nullarbor Plains;
• The highlands, the long eastern highlands and the central highlands;
• The Gulf areas, the Gulf of Carpentaria and Spencer Gulf;
• The islands (Tasmania, Kangaroo, Rottnest, Groote, Tiwis, Torres Strait, and the many other smaller islands of the East coast);
• The great rift valleys, such as those of the Blue Mountains; and
• The Great Barrier Reef, easily seen from outer space, spread along 2,300 kilometers (1,400 miles) off the east coast of Queensland, comprising 2,900 separate coral reefs.

It is believed that in the early period of Australia’s history, the southern part of the interior was covered by a huge, inland sea. Evidence of this is the discovery of seashells and fossilized sealife, far inland, in caves on the Nullarbor Plains and many other unexpected inland places. The skeleton of a large whale was discovered far from the sea, in the Murray River valley.

Australia still has a large number of salt lakes in the southern part of the continent. Even today, as land is cleared and the water table rises, bringing salt to the surface, the problem of salt-contaminated soil continues to distress farmers.

Overview of Australia
As the last Ice Age ended, large freshwater lakes, such as Lake Mungo, covered vast areas of land. Birds and other animals abounded there. Like the wildlife, groups of Aboriginal people also made their camps beside the shores while these abundant and easily harvested food sources were available. Countless underground rivers of fresh water still flow in places throughout parched areas across the land.

Lake Mungo, in the far southwest corner of New South Wales, is the site of the second-oldest archaeological discoveries in Australia. Artifacts, animal bones, and human skeletons—Mungo Man and Mungo Woman—discovered in the 1960s, are now believed to be of much more ancient origin than was first estimated. Recent carbon-dating studies place their existence at considerably more than 56,000 years ago.

Other sites of great interest to archaeologists and anthropologists, yielding information about early Aboriginal origins, are at Talgai in Queensland, Keilor near Melbourne in Victoria, Cohuna and Kow Swamp in northern Victoria, Tartanga and Roonka in South Australia, and Lakes Mungo and Nitchie in Western New South Wales.

Uluru (Ayers Rock), a world-renowned spiritual symbol of Australia, is an enormous rock in the heart of Australia, surrounded mainly by desert. To the Aborigines it is the most sacred site. Along with nearby Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), it is perceived to be a source of very powerful energy. It has a strong mythological association with the Aborigines and is steeped in the mystique of their spiritual beliefs. There are Dreamtime stories connected with every feature of this amazing landmark.

The Kimberley area, in the northwest of Western Australia, is also a source of powerful energy for the Aborigines, and many of the most prized examples of cave art—such as the Wandjina murals—are found there.

How Climate Affected the Aborigines

The climate of Australia determined where Aboriginal people settled in early times. As the Ice Ages retreated, the climate gradually became much more temperate. The summers were very hot. Although the winters could be quite cold, the Aborigines never found a need for multiple layers of clothing, as have people in other countries. On the mainland, most people wore no clothes at all for most of the year. Only in the intense cold of a harsh winter was it necessary to cover the body with a light covering of animal skins.

However, on the island of Tasmania, where the climate was much colder than on the mainland, people made cloaks and garments of roughly woven fibers or animal skins, such as possum and wallaby, to keep out the bitter cold of winter. In the summertime it was not necessary to cover the body as much.

Floods drenched and ravaged the landmass of Australia, creating vast temporary expanses of water—almost inland seas—especially in the north, which is prone to fierce cyclones and seasonal, monsoon weather.
Droughts plagued the Aboriginal communities from time to time, and knowledge of the sites of fresh drinking water was essential. During droughts, these nomadic people would travel long distances to where they knew of underground rivers and springs, which could provide the precious life-giving water.

Some of the plants also provided moisture to stave off thirst in the parched landscapes of the desert in which they lived and traveled. Incorporated in the stories are details of what these plants were and where they could be found. As a result of the frequent droughts, the Aboriginal rainmaking ceremonies developed as a special part of the culture.

The Megafauna

Because Australia was isolated from other major continents, the megafauna (mega means large) that evolved were unique. The animals adapted to survive some of the harshest conditions on the planet. Some of these unique animals—kangaroos, wallabys, koalas, bandicoots, and many others—were marsupials, carrying and nurturing their young in an external pouch.

Between 50,000 and 15,000 years ago, nearly one-third of all the early megafauna living in Australia became extinct. Whether they disappeared as a result of climatic changes, ecological pressure created by hunting—with spears, boomerangs and clubs—or the land management techniques of humans, such as firestick farming, is still being debated and researched.

The marsupial lion—similar to a saber-toothed leopard—no longer exists, but it hunted the other big cats, like the Tasmanian tiger, as well as giant wallabys and kangaroos.

Some animals, such as the diprotodon, a rhinoceros-sized wombat, which was the world’s largest marsupial, and the procoptodon, a 3-meter- (11-foot) high kangaroo, did not survive the Pleistocene period. However, many of these giant animals evolved, over the passage of time, into the smaller species we are familiar with in Australia today.

Giant birds, such as the giant emu, the eagle, and other pteradactyl-like creatures, were feared predators; they have now evolved into much smaller species. They are still predatory in habit, hunting smaller creatures such as rabbits and lizards.
Stories about these giant creatures are still told by Aboriginal people and handed down to younger generations. Some of the tales refer to giant lizards, snakes, kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, Tasmanian tigers, wombats, emus, eagles, and many other creatures, and tell of heroic acts that saved people from falling prey to them.

Giant crocodiles inhabited the warmer northern areas and were sometimes found as far south as Northern New South Wales. Fossilized footprints of giant dinosaurs, made in the dry sand in which they walked, which is now solid and weathered sandstone, have been found in Western Australia.

Aboriginal rock art and paintings, found in caves scattered around Australia, such as those in New South Wales, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory, often record images of many of these enormous prehistoric beasts. Archaeological sites throughout Australia show fossilized evidence of the opalized bones of a wide variety of megafauna. Scientific research is still being carried out to determine the reason for the demise of this country’s fascinating branch of the world’s megafauna.

The Fauna

As previously mentioned, the animals of this timeless land are unique. A wide variety of Aboriginal stories are told that use many of the much-loved Australian creatures to explain the value systems of the people.

Among the marsupials are many different species of wallabies, kangaroos, koalas, possums, bandicoots, and wombats. All of these exist by grazing on vegetation, and they travel great distances to find the sweetest grasses. The koala eats the leaves of certain gum trees and does not need water to survive.
These marsupials produce tiny embryos, smaller than the size of your little finger, which transfer externally from the uterus, wriggling through the thick fur to the mother’s pouch, and fasten on to her teat for their food. There they stay until they are strong and old enough to survive independently. During a period of extended drought, kangaroos are able to defer giving birth until conditions are more favorable, when the embryo is released to find its way up through the thick furry coat to the warmth and safety of its mother’s pouch.

The platypus must be the most amazing creature in the animal world. It has the fur of an animal and webbed feet, lays eggs, suckles its young, has the bill of a duck, and lives in the water. These peculiar animals thrive in the cold water of the mountain streams in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales and Victoria.

Australia has many reptiles, such as snakes, lizards, and goannas. Many snakes shed their skin each year. A lizard, if trapped, is able to discard its tail, growing a new one in its place. Australia is home to two-thirds of the species of monitor lizards in the world.

The echidna (similar to a hedgehog) evolved from the very large spiny anteater into the smaller creature we know today. Many fascinating ground-dwelling creatures also changed over time.

Although snakes are close relatives of the lizards, unlike the lizards they are all deaf. To compensate for this sensory lack, snakes are extremely sensitive to vibrations. They “taste” their surroundings by flicking their tongues in and out, reading the chemical messages gathered on them. Australia’s snake population contains some of the most venomous snakes in the world, including the Tiger snake, Eastern brown, death adder, and Taipan.

Francis Firebrace tells a story about the Aboriginal way of dealing with snakebite. The person or child who was bitten was set on the ground below the snake, which was hung above him by its tail, from a tree. If the person lived, so did the snake. According to Francis, it was quite a successful trick.

It is believed that the dingo, the native dog, was introduced to Australia from Asia during the last Ice Age. The dingo is the only animal known to have been adopted by the Aborigines as a domestic pet. The story of the Devil Dingo is strongly linked to Ayers Rock (Uluru), which was the location of a more recent dingo horror story. Story number 27, Djididjidi and Kuburi, refers to this creature.

Birds also evolved into the smaller species we are familiar with today. Emus still roam freely across the land but, because they are now valued commercially, many are intensively farmed. Giant eagles evolved into a variety of the predatory bird species we are familiar with and can be found high in the mountains and on cliffs around the coastline.

Huge parrots grew over time into the profusion of smaller, multicoloured parrot species we now know. The kookaburra is still frequently heard heralding the
dawn, just as it was in the story (see number 7), and the owl can still be heard in the bush at night. Insects were among the earliest species to inhabit the country. Initially, some of them had shells for protection, but they later evolved into those we are familiar with, without any protective shells. Often they sting or employ some other means of protection, such as painful bites. In the northern swampy regions, huge colorful dragonflies inhabited the lily-filled lagoons.

The Aborigines soon discovered that the larvae of some insects were an excellent food source. Grubs, such as witchetty grubs and Bogong moths, were highly prized. Native bees produced honey in their nests in hollow branches of trees. It became a treasured food among the Aborigines and was known as “sugar bag.”

Australia is home to some of the most venomous spiders in the world, the redback and several species of funnelweb. A number of others may inflict a nasty bite that can cause victims serious health problems and even death. Through their stories, Aboriginal people taught their children to respect and avoid these dangerous creatures.

A thousand of the world’s 10,000 ant species are found in Australia. Bull (dog) ants and jumper ants are the most primitive of the ant species and are found only in Australia. They are aggressive, jumping to attack their victims. Their sting is painful and, occasionally, lethal, the venom being similar to that of the wasp family. Aboriginal children learned through story to give these dangerous ants a wide berth. The honey ant, however, was much prized by the Aborigines as a sweet treat.

White ants (termites) wreak havoc, damaging timber structures. In the far north, tall anthills, created by termites, are a distinctive feature of the bush landscape. Even termites are respected by the Aborigines, for the hollow logs they create. Branches, hollowed out by termites, are shaped and used by the Aborigines as didgeridoos, which are now their most important musical instruments. This practice began in the Northern Territory and has spread quite recently throughout the land (story number 16).

Australia’s many exquisitely beautiful butterflies, moths, and other insects such as dragonflies and mosquitoes are often the subject of Aboriginal Dreamtime stories, such as, “The Birth of the Butterflies: A Story of When Death First Came to the Land” (story number 6).

Australia has almost 7,000 different species of flies, which can cover any living thing that is standing still. They are attracted to any source of moisture, such as the mouth, nose, or ears of human beings, and they create many problems for animals when they seek out the moist areas of their bodies.

The Flora

Despite its harsh climate, Australia is host to unique flora, some of which have survived for many thousands of years. Plants such as the cycads, food of the dinosaurs, still flourish in the tropical rainforests of the East Coast and provide food for the Aborigines. The discovery of the Wollemi pine in the Blue Mountains, once thought to be extinct, has recently been a cause for celebration. Scientists have now found the pines to be at least 4,000 years old, with a fossil line stretching back more than 90 million years.

The Aborigines have a wealth of knowledge about the many fruits, berries, bulbs, roots, and seeds that provide a rich source of food from the native flora. The seeds of the...
wattle (acacia), when ground together with some native grass seeds, make a good flour that is used in making Widga bread even today.

Even the deserts are not bare; they are host to the saltbush and mallee gum trees and other ground-hugging plants from which liquid can be obtained. Rushes and flaxes were woven into mats or fabric for use in making clothing or dilly bags. A type of resin from the grass tree was used by Aborigines to make tools.

To this day, “new” species of plants are still being discovered. There are many wonderful species of dendrobian and other types of orchids, ferns, and insectivorous plants found deep in the rainforests, of which the Aborigines knew the healing secrets. Research is currently being conducted into the possible use of these previously unknown healing plants in the battle against cancer, AIDS, and some other virulent diseases.
As previously mentioned, at one time scholars believed that a migration from Asia and the islands to the north of Australia happened some 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. Research is now showing that Aboriginal people have inhabited this land for much longer. The people mainly lived a nomadic existence, settling at times around the river basins and coastlines of Australia. The easy availability of food, and especially the location of good sources of drinking water, decided where they would camp, particularly when travelling through the desert regions. Today in some of the most arid deserts, Aboriginal symbols representing the presence of waterholes can be found on rocks and trees and on the ground, helping parched travelers find precious water hidden just beneath the surface of the desert.

It is estimated that when European settlement began in Australia in 1788, there were approximately 250,000 to 300,000 Aboriginal people living in separate communities around the country. Within a few years following colonization whole groups had disappeared due to the devastation caused by introduced diseases such as measles, smallpox, and sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis, as well as outright killings and massacres.

**The People and the Land**

Before European settlers arrived in Australia no one was landless. The Aborigines, the oldest continuous race on Earth, were generally a peaceful, nonaggressive people, who lived in distinct communities. They cared deeply for the other members of their tribe and also for their land.
They lived on land that was considered their territory, bequeathed to them by their spirit ancestors in the Dreaming. They did not consider Australia to be a “whole country” but rather perceived the particular territory in which they lived to be their land, or their country, of which they were the custodians. Each group’s particular section of territory was defined geographically, by rivers, streams, hills, mountains, or deep gorges.

To the Aboriginal people the Earth is alive. At certain times the people would sing the land, singing it into existence. They would go down to their tribal area to sing the land to keep it alive and to let their special stretch of land know that they were there honoring it. Another common Aboriginal belief is that unsung land is “dead land,” and if the songlines are forgotten, the land itself will die.

“Custodial rights” to a piece of land were passed down by the use of songlines that stretched far back into Aboriginal history. These “songlines” described and defined the shape and size of the land in each region. Everyone inherited, as his or her personal property, a stretch of the ancestors’ songlines: couplets, which were linked to that particular stretch of country.

The custodianship of this piece of land was passed down through the male line, because the females normally came from another tribe, according to totemic lore. After an Aboriginal couple were married, providing the husband first obtained permission, he could go and hunt in his wife’s people’s territory as well as his own.

A man’s couplets from the tribal song were a most important part of Aboriginal protocol. They were his title to his territory, of which he was the temporary custodian. He could lend the songs to others for brief periods and could also borrow others’ verses, but he couldn’t sell or dispose of them. His role was that of custodian until the songs were passed on to the next generation. They belonged to his descendants.

To the Aboriginal traveler, a song was both a map and a direction finder. Providing you knew the song, you could always find your way across the country. When moving around the country, travelers usually carried a message stick, a small piece of wood incised with marks, to show they had good reason to be where they were. These travelers also needed to know some of the songlines of the territory through which they were passing.

To cross a neighboring tribe’s territory required knowledge of that tribe’s song. The singing of the couplets from a portion of that song would determine whether permission would be granted or denied. If the traveler couldn’t sing the land, it became very serious business and was perceived as an invasion, likely to end in death.

If granted permission, the traveler would leave some of his weapons at the boundary, go onward and complete his business, then return back across the border in safety. However, if he tried to recross the boundary again without permission, he would be perceived as trespassing and could be killed.

It is very likely that this was the explanation for the killing of many European settlers in the very early days of colonization. Unaware of the custodial protocol, the settlers were perceived as invaders and were killed according to Aboriginal custom.
The Aborigines were a people capable of living off the land without degrading it. They did not cultivate crops or have domestic animals, other than the dingo, which they used for hunting. The Aborigines moved with the seasons and followed the rains. In good seasons the community moved out into the drier regions; in drought periods they moved back near the rivers and permanent waterholes.

They knew how to harvest the oceans, coastline, lakes, rivers, and plains for the abundant marine life and animals they supported. Aborigines could exist even in the arid regions, because they could read the land and always knew where to find sources of water and food. They had a deep respect for the land and the creatures on it, and they took from it only what they needed to sustain life.

**Walkabout**

At certain seasonal times, Aboriginal tribes would go on walkabouts, living off the Earth’s bounty. The reasons for this travel were manifold. Sometimes they followed food sources, gathering seasonal foods as they went. They also traded with other tribes or travelled for ceremonial purposes to practice tribal rituals. In all cases they traveled light for long distances on foot, meeting with other tribes in the region.

The women and girls harvested yams with their digging sticks and picked fruit or nuts—such as the nuts from banyan trees—or wild plums and other fruits. They collected wattles seeds to grind into flour and brought back honey ants, which were highly prized. Sometimes they collected “sugar bag” (wild honey). These items were carried in coolamons, hollowed out bark containers. The larger items, such as small mammals or lizards, they carried in woven dilly bags. The babies were also carried in coolamons, partly filled with soft sand for comfort.

The preparation and cooking of food was a task for women, who winnowed and ground the seeds on a Nardoo, or large stone, used in the making of Widga bread, which was cooked on hot stones placed in the ashes of the fire.

The earth oven was a hollow or shallow depression in the ground, in which a fire was lit. Once the flames died down, the animal to be cooked would be placed (with its skin intact) among the ashes and covered by more hot ashes and earth. There it would stay until it was cooked. Sometimes water was poured into a hole made in the “oven” to generate steam.

Women were responsible for collecting drinking water and firewood and for erecting the structures, the huts or shaded areas. The men took the young boys along with them, teaching them the important skills of tool making, tracking, and hunting. They sought out turtle eggs, fish, and birds such as muttonbirds, emus, geese, or other migratory species, as well as kangaroos, possums, and bandicoots.

Francis Firebrace says that in Queensland the Kangaroo dance is performed by Aboriginal hunters when they come across a herd of kangaroos. Although the kangaroo’s sense
of smell is sharp, its vision is poor, and the unclear shapes it sees downwind are similar to its own. The hunters mimic the movement of the herd and gradually close in until they are close enough to catch them.

The harvesting of these animals was carefully considered, and the Aborigines always left sufficient numbers for the species to multiply and survive for the future. The Aborigines did not kill the platypus, which they regarded as taboo.

The locations of migratory insects, such as the Bogong moth, which nested in hordes in the cracks and roofs of cool caves high up in the mountains in southern New South Wales during the summer time, drew many tribes from all the surrounding areas in search of these succulent delicacies. When the hunters had located the moths, they gathered them with a Bogong pick made out of igneous rock and took them back in a coolamon to the nearby camps, where the moths were thrown on the fire and cooked. This was a greatly prized delicacy. (See story number 18.)

Sometimes the tribes hunted for the locations of wild beehives, from which they plundered the stores of wild honey or “sugar bag.” Francis says that a little trick the Aborigines used to locate the hive was to catch a wild bee (wild bees don’t sting) and attach a piece of spider web by winding it around the bee’s body. When it flew off to the hive, the glint of the trailing spider web led them to the prized store of honey.

After the rains, the sweet grasses grew, bringing large numbers of kangaroos, wallabies, and emus to graze on them. The Aborigines hunted these animals with spears and boomerangs, taking only what they needed. Nothing was wasted. The meat was consumed, the skins were used to make clothing, and the bones were used to make weapons or tools, such as fish hooks or spearheads.
Whenever hunting groups met, they would celebrate the occasion with feasting and performances of dances, songs, and stories. Some of these festivals still in existence are the Bogong Moth Festival and the Brewarrina Fish Festival of New South Wales.

The Corroboree

The corroboree, or campfire dancing, was usually a celebration or gathering of several tribes. It involved every member of the community, from the youngest child to the oldest man or woman. On many occasions, at a corroboree the elders would sit down together and discuss the matching of boys and girls as potential marriage partners.

Accompanying the dancing would be feasting. The combined Aboriginal tribes could put together a wonderful banquet of fruit and berries and fish, mammals, or birds, depending on what was plentiful at the time.

There would be ritual dancing, some drumming, and clapping stick playing, and everyone joined in the singing. Dancers used to describe their story in dance, accompanied by singing and vocal noises to emphasize their actions, such as grunts, yelps, hisses, whistles, and hoots.

Following colonization by the British, the corroborees began to change. Some of the settlers’ bad habits, such as using guns, tobacco, and horses, which appeared strange to the Aborigines, were acted out by the dancers.

There are areas of Australia in which, even today, the important events in tribal lives are celebrated with the corroboree.

Ceremonial Walkabouts

Sometimes the men would take the young boys who were approaching manhood off to a secret location to initiate them into and educate them about the secret and sacred rites and give them the knowledge necessary to be able to take their place in adult society. This ritual was referred to as “men’s business,” and women were totally excluded.

Often these rites involved fire ordeals; ritual operations such as tooth evulsion and scarring to teach the younger members to withstand pain; and circumcision, which was for hygienic reasons. In these ceremonies they used sacred objects made from pieces of wood or stone. The patterns engraved on them provided cues for the legendary stories, which were part of the ceremonial ritual. These sacred objects also could not be seen or handled by women or children.

Sacred bullroarers were whirled over the head on a piece of string to warn outsiders that a sacred ceremony was taking place. These bullroarers represented the voice of a mythical being associated with death and rebirth, which is how the Aborigines perceived the emergence of the boys into manhood. Women were not permitted to hear the voices of bullroarers.

In some parts of Australia—the Central Desert, the Gulf Country of the Northern Territory, and Northwestern Australia—these practices are still carried out. The sacred sites—known as bora grounds—were often marked by large elaborate ground drawings or geometric motifs carved into the trunks of trees.
Trade

Often walkabouts were for trading missions, and people took items with them that they would barter with other tribes for goods they desired. This was an important part of Aboriginal economic and social life.

They carried stone for implements and special woods for boomerangs, clapping sticks, or weapon making. They traded gum and ochre pigments for decoration, animal skins, special shells, ornaments, and sacred objects. One of the extremely heavy items they carried for great distances was the rock used as grindstones. Many of these have been found thousands of kilometers from the quarries from which they were taken.

Trade routes extended from Darwin and Broome in the Northwest, to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northeast, down the west and east coasts to South Australia and Victoria. Much use was made of the complex river systems for transportation and, of course, for food and water. Major Aboriginal trade routes crisscrossed the entire country.

Transportation

Much of the travel undertaken by the Aborigines was on foot. There were no horses or vehicles in Australia until colonization. For some unknown reason these ancient people did not discover the benefits of the wheel.

Dug-outs, wooden canoes hollowed out of the wood of special trees, or watercraft made of reeds and thick bark were the only means of transportation used to navigate the complex river systems. Canoes were often made of long sheets of thick bark, cut from the side of a tree, shaped, and bound at the ends with a woven fiber rope.

On the Murray River in southeast Australia, the Aborigines used rafts made of strong, light poles lashed together that could hold up to eight to ten people. These strong, light rafts were propelled by a person pushing with a long pole. Some of the travelers dived off the raft, to collect fresh shellfish, fish, and other items of food from along the riverbanks. These foods were cooked on the raft over a fire built on a platform of wet seaweed and sand.

Travelling in this way meant that long journeys throughout Australia took a great deal of time. The nomadic lifestyle of the tribes therefore developed out of necessity. It was better to move the tribe than to go off alone, exposing the families to potential invasion.
The Aborigines, through their totemic system of marriage and tribal identification, were more complex and structured by comparison to Western society, which believes in free choice in marriage.

Early in the period of Aboriginal history known as the Dreamtime, the Aborigines adopted the totemic system. This provided a method of identification for each tribe, bestowing a sense of identity and belonging on each member, as well as creating a spiritual connection between human beings and the natural world.

It is widely believed that these totems—mammals, fish, or birds—were sacred gifts bestowed by the spirits back in the Dreamtime. Each tribe shared a common totem, believed to be the living spirit of an Aboriginal ancestor. These tribal totems were passed down through many generations to all the future generations, usually through the patrilineal line but occasionally, in some tribes, through the matrilineal line. The members of the tribe did not kill or eat the species that was their totem.

Each person also had his or her own personal totem. In some cases an expectant mother would identify the animal or other creature that was nearest to her when she felt the first stirring of life in the child she was carrying. This would become the totem for that child. In other tribes, it would be decided when the child was born what the totem creature would be. There are also a multitude of myths among Aboriginal tribes about the selection of parents by spirit babies and their relationship to totems.

The Aboriginal moiety marriage structure is one of the most complex and highly organized systems known. The Aborigines were usually part of quite small communities. Tribes were often divided into two groups or, later, into four or eight. Members of a particular totemic group or clan could not intermarry. A member of a tribe with a kangaroo as its totem could not marry another person whose totem was a kangaroo. He or she would have to marry a person whose totem was different, such as an emu or a wallaby.

The elders, the wise older members of the tribe, would carefully select marriage partners when both individuals were babies or young children. This system precluded free choice but also prevented problems created by continued intermarriage within the small tribal communities.
These spiritual and life values were kept alive by the continuation of the traditional ceremonies. Spirit ancestors included the Fertility Mother, Great Snake Ancestors, such as the Rainbow Serpent of the northern areas, and Sky Heroes of the eastern regions. The stories of their lives and deeds as creators of the world as we know it were reenacted regularly in the ancient ceremonies, which are carried out in Australia even today.

The Arts

In the presentation of the oral tradition in Aboriginal Australia, art, dance, music, and storytelling, in all their diverse forms, are used. All the many forms of art, storytelling, music, and dance are interwoven; together, they form a cultural whole.

Unfortunately, over the course of the past 200 years, since colonization, the oral art forms have been looked at separately rather than as part of a whole cultural entity by non-Aboriginals who have tried to form an understanding of Aboriginal culture. This has resulted in a fragmented overview of Aboriginal Australia.

Aboriginal Art

Some Aboriginal art developed out of a need to record the whereabouts of mammals, fish, or other food sources, especially, at the sites where water could be found. Some of this art was in the form of cave paintings. Pictures were drawn with pigments on the walls of caves or carved or chiseled and scratched into rock or the bark of trees.

Travelers in the Tanami Desert today are very thankful for the circular whorl symbols, carved in the bark of trees or on rocks, which tell the traveler of the presence of life-giving water. We could possibly look at this art form as “survival” art.

In the caves were pictures of early civilizations, showing people dancing and hunting or many of the other events of their lives, such as birth, battles, and corroborees, as well as mythical stories. Often they had a totemic meaning, showing a mixture of human and animal body parts.

Many pictures were symbolic, made of dots, lines, circles, whorls, and zigzags. All told a story that the Aboriginal storyteller could interpret. Often they were the stories of hunts or journeys.

Sometimes the dots were the footprints of animals or of the hunter. The zigzags were the tracks of the hunters and the curves were the patterns left by a snake. Whorls represented water or waterholes. They often showed where other animals crossed the path. A large thick line could be a river or the sacred track of an ancestor.

Some pictures were maps of areas which, when seen from the air, are identical to the Aboriginal paintings. How the painters of so long ago were able to obtain this perspective in their painting remains a mystery. It is suggested that many of the locations were seen from the tops of tall trees or high up in the hills or mountains.

A most unusual style of painting is the Aboriginal “X-ray” art. In this style, the internal organs of the creatures or people are shown as well as the exterior forms. Gigantic murals of these animals can be seen in the cave paintings of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Recent Aboriginal artworks have adopted and popularized these special styles of painting.
In the Kimberley ranges and areas of Eastern Australia, pictures of stick-like figures can be found in caves, showing many different activities of these people. These stick-like paintings are called Mimi art and closely resemble the style of art found in many places in the Pacific Islands.

Because we have now lost many of the tribal storytellers, who had been given the stories that explained the pictures, it is becoming harder to understand them. The recording of these stories on paper to preserve them for posterity is now a matter of some urgency.

When hiking in some of the bush areas outside Sydney, I have often come across ancient Aboriginal pictures, carved in the large rock surfaces, which tell of the presence of particular animals. Because these surfaces were exposed to the weather, they were engraved rather than painted, so they have lasted for generations.

The Wandjina paintings of the northern Kimberley region of Northwestern Australia are very important and quite special examples of cave art. These paintings of spirit figures are believed to be of Creator heroes of the Dreamtime. They are closely linked to the Rainbow Serpent, which lived with the spirit babies in the spirit pools of that region.

The Wandjina spirit people are believed to have drifted on the wind across this region, creating mountains, special rock formations, and waterholes. They brought the precious gift of rain to the parched land that nurtured the wildlife that lived there. The ancient tribal leaders often made requests of the Wandjina and Rainbow Serpent, asking for rain and fertility of plants and animals.

In some caves, the artists stenciled pictures of hands or feet on the rock surfaces, using natural pigments mixed with water or animal fat to color the areas surrounding them. Many of these works of art can be found today in caves along the East Coast of New South Wales. Many Aboriginal artists still use a handprint or footprint as their signature.

**Storytelling**

Although the Aboriginal community regularly sat around the campfire following their evening meal and listened to the storytellers unfold the stories from the Dreamtime or tell of daily happenings such as hunts and tribal battles, the storyteller’s role was really that of cultural educator. Because the Aboriginal culture was oral (writing was unknown to these people), the teller’s role was not just to entertain but to keep the culture alive while educating the growing generation of children and young adults in the history, the traditional values, and the lore of their people.
Often the “aunties” (older women) told the children stories to help protect them from dangers both inside and outside the boundaries of the camp and to enforce the taboos and traditions. Women took aside the girls approaching puberty and taught them secret “women’s business,” preparing them for their roles as wives and mothers to the next generation. There were many “secret” women’s stories passed on at this time, which men could not be told.

The men told stories of hunting, teaching the young boys vital information about survival and bushcraft, which was embedded in the stories they told. Storytelling played its part in the sacred initiation ceremonies, where “secret” information was passed on to the young boys approaching manhood. Women were not allowed to know these stories.

When telling the children stories, the storyteller gave no explanation of the meaning of them. All the stories they were told carried hidden knowledge, which reached down to a much deeper level of understanding. Familiarity with the story peeled away the different levels of knowledge and, finally, the vital information contained in the story would unfold for them. Later, when they heard the stories again, they were asked to repeat them to one another, until gradually, with repetition, understanding came.

Some stories passed on information about the heritage of tribal lands from the Dreamtime. Through story, they learned vital survival information, such as how people found the sources of water and the mythology associated with it.

Often the storyteller would tell stories of the night sky and how the figures of animals and people they could see in the collections of stars above them came to live in the sky (stories 1 and 2). Through stories, the people learned to identify stars, which could help them navigate their way around the country, helping them survive when in unfamiliar territory. There were stories explaining the arrival of showers of meteorites from outer space.

The Aborigines learned the habits of all living things—animals and plants—and were told stories that explained the creatures’ behavior in certain seasons. This information, given in the form of stories, taught them how the animals fed and how to track them when out hunting for food, as well as which berries and fruits were safe and when they were ripe for harvesting.

Stories were told that warned of the dangers of witchcraft, magic, and poison, and of the wild forces of nature, such as the whirlie whirlie winds, violent electric storms, floods, and fire, and how best to survive them.

There were stories that told of battles and the heroic achievements of their ancestral warriors; others told of sorcery and duplicity. All the stories that were told had to be entertaining to hold the attention of the audience. The storyteller held a highly respected place in Aboriginal society.

Storytelling seems complicated when one is searching for a particular Aboriginal story, because there are approximately 700 ways of telling each story, depending on the tribal group, land region, type of country, and the subject creature’s habitat. For example, there are many different versions of “How the Kangaroo Got Her Pouch” (see story number 11).
Music

The music produced by the Aborigines was mainly either vocal or a combination of vocal and clapping sticks. The songs that were sung were an extension of the storytelling. They, like the stories, were a direct link between the Dreamtime and the present and were part of every ceremony.

The songs were passed down from the Beginning and celebrated all aspects of life, bringing the past, present, and future into song. Often they were chants sung by women to send their men off to battles, hunts, trading missions, or secret rituals. It was believed that these songs endowed the men with supernatural strength and magic powers to avert evil spirits.

Sometimes songs were sung to bring rain or fertility to the parched land; following these songs, rain often pelted down, bringing with it new life and regrowth. Many songs were then sung thanking the spirits for their assistance.

The didgeridoo is a musical instrument, originally called Yidiki, which came from the tribes of the Gulf Country of the Northern Territory. In the 1940s and 1950s it was universally adopted as a musical instrument by most of the Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. It is made from a branch hollowed out by termites, which is cleaned, smoothed, and decorated. These branches usually measured about one to two meters (six to nine feet), although some might be even longer. Great skill was needed to produce an acceptable sound by circular breathing in this instrument, which operates in much the same way as the ancient Irish horns.

By using the technique of circular breathing, carefully positioning the lips, and with much practice, the musician playing it could produce a deep, vibrating, rhythmic sound. I have been told that the music and vibrations of the didgeridoo have a significant healing effect on certain parts of the anatomy, where it resonates.

Women were not allowed to touch this instrument because it hosts a male spirit. For a woman to attempt to play the didgeridoo would ensure much “sorry business” for her, even causing her to abort a child if she were pregnant.

Other Instruments

The rhythms, ever present in Aboriginal music, were made by way of jiggled bones, clapping sticks (specially seasoned, polished, and weighted pieces of selected resonant woods), or by hitting two boomerangs together.

Drums were made of firmly sewn kangaroo skins, stuffed with emu feathers and struck with the palm of the hand. Hollowed out sections of logs were used as drums and hit with heavy sticks. Striking the ground with large sticks or heavy bundis (clubs) or other combinations of weapons produced a deep bass rhythm.

An unusual instrument often used by the Aborigines was a gum leaf. This provided a clear, high-pitched sound. The quality and species of the leaf, use of the circular breathing technique, and position of the lips were important in the production of the sound.
Dance

Although the music was sometimes performed in its own right, it was mostly used as accompaniment for the dancers. People would sit after a meal, listening to the storytellers. When they were finished, the dancers would jump up and interpret the story in dance.

The song man and his singers began the performance, and the rhythm players joined in. Then would come the dancers, disappearing at the end of each dance into the darkness beyond the firelight.

Many famous dances include the dances of birds—the Emu, Cockatoo, Brolga—or other animals—the Kangaroo, Goanna, Turtle, or Snake—in which the dancers would imitate the habits of these creatures. On special occasions, body paint was used to great effect. The dancers would paint their bodies with ochre and clay to add dramatic emphasis to their performance.

Sometimes the dancers would perform a scary dance, such as the Ghost dance, in which a skeleton appears out of the darkness, dances, and disappears back into the gloom. They loved to portray scary creatures like the Bunyip or Hairy Man.

Often they would dance about some significant event that happened during the time of the corroboree, such as a great hunting or fishing story. Every aspect of life was celebrated in some form of dance.

In addition to the normal campfire activities, there were dances that were part of the secret and sacred ceremonies, which were performed only at sacred sites. Men would paint their bodies with white clay and ochre, adding feathers for extra effect, almost as if they were putting on a costume. Women were excluded from these secret ceremonies.

In Queensland, hunting parties would perform the Kangaroo dance to confuse the herds of kangaroos and allow the hunters to get closer to them.

Education

The education of the young children was the responsibility of the entire tribe. The elders made many of the decisions for the tribe and provided inspiration and advice to the young adults. They also closely supervised the training and education of the young.

There was no written language, so the children learned by oral means, from the stories that were told and by practical demonstrations of the subjects they were learning. These stories were told by elders, aunties, parents, and, of course, the storytellers, whose job it was to educate the young. They taught the values, traditions, and mythology of their people from the Dreamtime.

With the encouragement of the men, boys learned basic survival skills, such as making weapons from stone, wood, or bone and using them to hunt animals. Most important, they learned how to provide food and find water; the knowledge of which was vital to their survival. They speared or snared kangaroos, emus, possums, goannas, snakes, and lizards.

The boys learned how to smoke out or snare burrowing animals and catch birds with boomerangs and clubs. The many skills of fishing were mastered, and they learned how to dislodge and catch flying foxes from the trees in which they hung upside down.
Special skills in recognizing footprints and tracking both animals and people were taught. The young men could eventually track every member of their tribe on sight, by reading signs such as broken or displaced twigs, stones, or other marks left on the ground. Animal tracks were much easier to follow.

As they approached manhood, the young men were schooled in the initiation procedures by the tribal elders, part of which included a rigorous testing period. They learned to overcome fear, pain, hunger, and humiliation.

Women were responsible for the education of the girls, who were taught how to recognize sources of foods; which berries and fruits, seeds, and fish were good to eat; how and when to gather them; and the ways to prepare them.

The essential information about how to survive in the harsh conditions of their land, the ability to erect simple structures for shelter, and a thorough knowledge of bush lore were fundamental ingredients of girls’ education.

The taboos associated with food preparation were considered an important part of girls’ education. They were taught how to make dilly bags and coolamons, used to carry the food they collected.

They were shown how to select and use the two stones on which their seeds were ground to make flour. Sitting alongside the older women, they were shown how to make mats and the nets for catching fish, as well as other useful domestic items. This education was important for the roles they would assume later, as wives and mothers.

As they approached puberty, the girls were taught the “secret” information they needed for full initiation into adult life. They were taught to be careful not to be stalked and taken away by predatory males. They also had to undergo a testing period, but it was not as harsh as that which the boys endured. Immediately after their initiation, young girls were married to husbands, chosen for them at or soon after birth.

Children played many games when they were not being shown how to make or gather things. Theirs was a happy childhood, playing ball games, mock corroborees, string games, and spinning tops. The little girls had dolls to play with, and they copied the nurturing skills of their mothers and aunties. The boys played with boomerangs and sticks, which resembled spears.

Small children were given free rein, but once past puberty, initiated children quickly learned not to misbehave; if they did, they could expect to be punished. Aboriginal justice was sharp, fair, and swift, the injured party being given the right to punish the perpetrator of a crime. The elders would hear the accusations and decide whether the offender was guilty. Under the payback system, whole families punished the offender to make sure the act wasn’t repeated. There are still places in northern Australia, where this payback system of justice is practiced.
The Aboriginal people do not have one single language. At one time there were at least 700 different tribal groups in Australia, each speaking its own language. Whenever the tribal groups in a region came together for a festival, they spoke a regional dialect that they all understood. Neighboring tribes could speak much of their neighbors’ dialect, which also allowed them to communicate with each other.

There were also special symbolic languages for use in sacred rituals and for talking to certain close relatives. Often, sign language was employed as a means of communication.

**Impact of Europeans on the Language**

The impact of the European invasion on the Aboriginal languages was disastrous. As in many other conquered nations throughout history, the conquerors attempted to annihilate the language, culture, and values of the conquered people, replacing them with their own.

Colonial administrators quickly outlawed the use of the Aboriginal language and also many tribal customs. People could be punished very harshly—even jailed or put to death—for speaking a tribal language. This drove the culture underground, where in some places it was still taught by the elders.

To the Aboriginal people, these cultural customs were part of their heritage, and they fought hard to have their rights restored. For years they struggled to win the right to speak and teach their children the Aboriginal language, only to have many of the children taken away soon after birth to be brought up and educated by European families. At that time, the government of the day perceived the Aborigines as savages and felt that removing children from their tribal groups would make the language transition easier.

This was a miserable time for this once proud people. It destroyed lives and resulted in many of the languages, cultures, and values that they had held sacred from the Dreaming being lost forever. Today it is referred to as the Deamtime Screamtime.

There is now a resurgence of interest among Aboriginal people in their languages, tribal customs, arts and crafts, music, and storytelling. Sadly, for some tribal groups it is much too late. Their language and culture are lost; their people are scattered far across the country.

Francis Firebrace tells the following story that shows clearly the misunderstandings that arose between the Aboriginal language and the English translation. It is about one of many words that were misconstrued in the translation.
At the time of colonial settlement, an English government official was walking along a beach with an Aborigine when he saw a strange furry animal with a long tail, hopping along in front of him. Unable to speak the Aboriginal language, he pointed his stick at it.

The Aborigine said, “kangaroo.”

The Englishman turned to the Aborigine, saying, “I say, my man, what was that you said?”

The Aborigine said again, “kangaroo.”

From that day on, kangaroo is what the animal was called, but the Aborigine was really saying, “There he goes.”

The kangaroo’s Aboriginal name is bagaray.
Recent History

Early Visitors

There were many visitors to Australia’s shores over the centuries before European colonization. Ships often passed along the coast, amazing the Aborigines who saw them. Stories of “islands pushed along by clouds” were about the sailing ships of the 1700s, with their strange men from far across the seas.

The Europeans who sailed in the visiting ships were perceived as ghosts or evil spirits by the Aboriginal people, who likened the color of their skin to the pallor of death. They feared these men, believing them to be the spirits of their ancestors returning to haunt their tribe, and they cowered before them.

One explorer, William Dampier, when writing about New Holland, as Australia was then known, described the Aborigines as “the miserablest people in the World, because they have no houses, or garments, no sheep, or poultry, or fruit.” On the other hand, James Cook, captain of the Endeavour, who admired their acceptance of a simple life, uncluttered by possessions, said of the Aborigines in his diary that “They appear to be the most wretched People on Earth; but, in reality, they are far more happier than we Europeans.”

European Invasion and Colonization

On January 23, 1788, the first fleet, carrying a cargo of convicts being transported from England, arrived and anchored in Botany Bay. Contact was made with the local tribe of Aborigines when Captain Phillip signaled that he required water. At first they were friendly, but subsequently, like other groups of Aborigines in the bay, they became quite hostile.

The fleet moved to what is now called Sydney, and an English flag was hoisted at Sydney Cove on January 26, to the amazement of the Aborigines. The invaders came ashore and took possession of the land without any sign of respect for the Aboriginal land protocols.

This seeming lack of respect for Aboriginal custodianship of the land and the protocols associated with it eventually led to many clashes with the settlers. The Aborigines grew to fear the men on horses, which at first they perceived as four-footed, hoofed, monstrous creatures with two heads, that stank like bunyips and defiled nature.

The Aborigines watched in amazement as large tracts of bush were cleared on their former lands and the native animals were slaughtered to make way for sheep and cattle. With their food sources—kangaroos and emus—gone, naturally the Aborigines, who were...
now facing starvation, felt entitled to help themselves to the settlers’ sheep and cattle that now grazed their lands.

This led to many bloody clashes between the settlers and authorities. Armed with only their spears and clubs to protect them, the Aborigines were unable to escape the guns of their adversaries. Large numbers were slaughtered in frequent bloody confrontations over the years following European settlement.

Once the mountains had been crossed, the settlers flowed across to the plains beyond, where government authorities overruled the Aborigines’ land rights, believing the un-farmed land was being wasted. This resulted in the granting of pastoral leases to squatters, who claimed vast areas of the country for grazing.

It is no surprise that the Aboriginal people attempted to wrest back their rights. Many were slaughtered in the battles that followed, their spears being no match for the guns of the English.

At the end of the nineteenth century, more than half the Aboriginal population—some 150,000 people—had died, either from disease, starvation, or been slaughtered. Many were shot or poisoned by squatters, clearing what they perceived as “vermin” from their farm-lands. Waterholes were poisoned, as was flour, which was doled out by the settlers.

Although no official records were kept of the Aboriginal deaths, about 270 European settlers died in the “black” versus “white” hostilities. Because the Aborigines were unable to compete with the settlers’ weapons, Aboriginal losses were probably in the tens of thousands.

The Aboriginal people were suffering. They were severely traumatized and displaced, had lost their language and culture, and were prone to many of the Europeans’ diseases, which included syphilis and alcoholism. In the Northwest, stories emerged of Aboriginal men being chained and used as slaves.

Some isolated tribal groups, in inaccessible areas in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, managed to avoid this traumatic experience and have continued with their traditional existence. However, most Aboriginal families were forced onto government reservations or missions. These were set up by a number of religious organizations, and the Aboriginal people were converted by the missionaries to the harsh realities of the form of Christianity preached in those days. The children were educated on the mission, were not allowed to attend local schools, and were discouraged from returning to their tribes. Historians agree that in the end the missions were a dismal failure and, together with the loss of identity, only led to a further degrading of the Aboriginal people.
Since the end of World War II, in which many Aboriginal soldiers served and lost their lives, things have very slowly begun to improve. Gradually, the people began to assimilate into the non-native population (often through intermarriage). With the referendum of 1967, Aborigines were for the first time counted in the census and finally recognized as Australian citizens.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the setting up of Aboriginal organizations that have allowed the Aboriginal people to have more say in the education, health, and employment opportunities for their children. Today, Aboriginal people are employed in many professions, are world leaders in a wide variety of sports, and enjoy a better lifestyle than their forebears could ever have envisaged.

Thanks to the work of the Aboriginal Arts Board and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, there is a great resurgence of traditional Aboriginal culture. Many young Aborigines are now finding exciting training and employment opportunities in the field of their arts and culture.

Aboriginal art is now extremely valuable, and it is highly prized and sought after by collectors in countries all around the globe. Now famous, Australia’s Aboriginal artists are busy producing works of art to fill the increasing demand.

The Aboriginal dance troupes are known throughout the world for their excellent performances. In recent years, Aboriginal musicians have been gaining worldwide recognition for their unique music.

Many Aboriginal writers have been published, and their traditional storytellers are travelling throughout the world, sharing the traditions and cultural values in the stories they tell at international festivals and events.

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**Story of a Removed Child**

Some time ago, I had an interesting experience when my friend Berice and I were working in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation unit with an Aboriginal group. We had asked each person to tell a story and were quite alarmed when one of the grown men broke down in tears. When we asked what was wrong, he explained that he had been removed from his family as a young child and taken to a mission, where he grew up.

He was upset because he didn’t know any of his tribal stories. He was no longer accepted as part of the tribe, nor did he have a sense of belonging in the non-native society in which he lived. Several others in this group were also victims of the same dilemma. We gave them a wildlife puppet and asked them to make up stories to tell later. This small incident brought home to us part of what the stolen generation of Aboriginal children had lost and why some had immersed themselves in alcoholism.
By Francis Firebrace (2000)

For a long time the crying of spirit in pain,
has echoed in Dreamtime across our terrain,
the rape of our women, the slaughter of men,
and stolen generation will haunt us again.
And echoes of voices, that speak from the caves,
saying, “Rise up my brothers, you are no longer slaves!”
And our ancestor spirits that join us at night
whisper and tell us the timing is right.
To speak of the wisdom, the culture, and land.
To share with white brother, so he understands,
that black Koori brothers, so rightly from birth,
are part of the mother, are part of the earth,
are part of the Dreaming and part of the song,
that tells us this country is where we belong.
And our ancestors rising with skins that are white,
will join and support us in this one-sided fight.
Against laws of injustice and laws that bring pain
and laws, that give power to the Government’s game.
And now joined together, we’ll make a big stand,
to bring back the title of our native land,
to bring back our freedom of spirit and pride,
to speak our own language and no longer hide.
For the time to awaken has finally come,
to reach out together and make us just one.
So, brother and sister, come give me your hand
and we’ll share in the Dreaming of this ancient land.
Part 2

The Tales

Locations of story origins.
We searched and found many different stories about Mirrabooka. This one, from South Australia, is the one we liked most.

The constellation, Crux Australis, or the Southern Cross, was regularly used for navigation down through the ages, by both European navigators and the Aboriginal people. It lies a third of the way between the equator and the southern celestial pole. Its stars vary in brightness, one being of the first magnitude, two of the second magnitude, and one of the third magnitude. The neighboring stars Alpha and Beta Centauri are known as the Pointers.

A LONG TIME AGO, when the world was young, Mululu was a great leader of the Kanda people. He had no son, but he had four beautiful daughters whom he loved dearly. Throughout his life Mululu protected and cared for his daughters, but when he grew old he knew he would need to make some plans for their future.

So he called his daughters to him, saying, “My daughters, I am getting close to the end of my life and will be leaving the Earth soon. I don’t want to see you forced into a marriage with a man you dislike. You have no brother to protect you from the spite and jealousies of the other women. So when I leave, I would like you to join me in the sky.”

The sisters reacted to his words with fear.

Seeing the fear reflected in their eyes, he reassured them, saying, “My beloved daughters, don’t be afraid. With the aid of the night spirits, I have visited a clever medicine man called Conduk. He is willing to help you reach our new home, where I can continue to care for you.”

After Mululu died, the four sisters journeyed for some days to find Conduk, whose camp was far to the south of where they lived.

When they arrived, they recognized Conduk, the medicine man, by the long, thick, gray beard their father had described. Lying alongside his camp was a huge pile of silvery rope, which Conduk had plaited from the hairs he’d plucked from his beard. One end of this rope reached up high into the sky.
When the girls heard that the rope was the only means of transport and that they were expected to climb it to reach their father, they were horrified.

But eventually, with Conduk’s help and encouragement, the sisters climbed up the rope, one after the other. Soon they reached the top, where they found to their delight that their father awaited them.

The sisters became the four bright stars of Mirrabooka—known to the white man as the Southern Cross—which shine in the night sky above Australia, not far from their father, Mululu, who is the bright star, Centaurus.
WHEN THE WORLD was young, all things took their shape. Trowenna, the heart-shaped island we call Tasmania, was very small, just a tiny sandbank in the southern sea. So it remained in complete darkness, all throughout the early days, for countless ages.

One morning, flashing fire, from out of the sea rose Parnuen, the Sun, and his wife, Vena. They traveled across the sky together and sank into the sea on the other side of Trowenna.

Being a woman, Vena could not travel as fast as Parnuen, so he carried her in his arms, right in the center of his huge disk-like body.

On the next day they rose again from the sea, and when they passed across the little island of Trowenna they dropped some seeds of the great gum tree, tarmonadro. The following day, Parnuen sprinkled them with rina dina, the raindrops.

On the next day he dropped shellfish into the seas all around the island. On the day after that, their first little baby, Moinee, was born. He was a strong, shining boy. Parnuen and his wife, Vena, placed Moinee high in the sky above the icy lands to the south of Trowenna. Moinee became the great South Star.

On the day following the birth of Moinee, their second son, gentle Dromerdene, was born, shining just like his brother. They also gave Dromerdene a home in the sky, midway between themselves and Moinee, the great South Star.

Beegerer and Piminer, the twins, were born on the next day. They became the great stars that we call Sirius and Betelgeuse.

Then came a great and terrible storm. Wind, rain, and huge seas almost washed away the little island of Trowenna.

Moinee, the great South Star, was showing his anger at his loneliness in the far south. So Parnuen, the Sun, sent his two spirits, Une, the Lightning, and Bura, the Thunder, to live with his son in the sky above the snow and ice of the Great South Land.
All through the ages of the Dreaming, icebergs from the Great South Land floated around Trowenna. Sometimes Pernuen would set his wife, Vena, down on one of these white islands. She would lie there watching him all day as he crossed the sky. Before he sank into the sea, Pernuen would return for Vena and they would slide together over the rim of the Earth.

One day, as Vena followed her husband’s journey across the sky, the iceberg on which Vena lay melted and she sank beneath the ocean. Only in the nighttime would she return, as the Moon.

In his grief and fury, Pernuen melted all the icebergs and they disappeared. He gave the island of Trowenna to Moinee, the South Star, who has watched over it ever since.

Throughout the Dreaming, the seeds Pernuen and Vena sowed sprouted and they became trees and other vegetation. The leaves fell down, mixing with sand, and became soil.

The shellfish grew and became numerous. As the old ones died, they became the stones and rocks of the great mountains on Trowenna. And that is how Tasmania became, when the world was young.
Lumerai, the Mother Snake
A Rainbow Serpent Creation Story from the Northern Territory

Retold with permission by Francis Firebrace

The Rainbow Serpent can be either male or female, depending on where the story is told. In this story the snake is female. This story comes from the indigenous people of Australia, who have been here since the beginning of time. If we listen with our hearts and minds to the messages it contains, we will not only have harmony amongst people of all cultures, but, most important, we’ll provide a future for our children and their children yet to come.

IN THE BEGINNING, the land was flat and the Great Mother Snake lay in a deep sleep, in the centre of the Earth. For a long, long time she slept. Eventually, she awoke and crawled up through the Earth, breaking through the surface in a shower of ochre dust.

As she journeyed slowly across the flat, empty land, so powerful was her magic that she caused it to rain heavily and the tracks her body left were filled with water. This created long winding rivers, great lakes, billabongs, and waterholes.

Everywhere she traveled, nurturing milk from her breasts soaked into the Earth, making the land fertile. Lush green rainforests with hanging vines grew, while trees of many shapes, colours, and patterns sprang up out of the ground.

By dipping her nose into the Earth, she created mountain ranges, hills, and valleys. Some parts of the land that we now call desert she left flat.

Then, returning back into the Earth, she awakened the animals, reptiles, and all the other land-dwelling creatures.

Some animals carried their young in a pouch, some laid eggs, some lived in the trees, and others burrowed under the ground. There were desert animals and forest animals, as well as reptiles of all sizes, colours, and patterns, and Lumerai took them all to live on the surface of the Earth.

She then awakened the tribes of birds and placed them in the air. Immediately the sky was filled with birds of all the colours of the rainbow, like the myriads of parrots, and other birds of many different shapes and sizes.
There were flightless birds that walked on the land, water birds, and long-legged birds that danced on the plains. Others that flew high in the air nested in the mountains and trees.

From deep in the Earth she brought forth the insects, ants, flies, moths, and butterflies, beetles, spiders, and scorpions.

Next, she awakened the water creatures and placed them in the rivers, lakes, and vast, deep oceans. There were fish that darted and swam in shallow streams, frogs that sang in the shadows at night, eels, turtles, and other strange creatures that lived in the depths of the ocean.

Finally, she went back down into the Earth. She awoke and brought man and woman from the womb of the Earth itself. From the mother snake they learned how to live in peace and harmony with all those other creatures who were their spiritual cousins.

And the mother snake taught them their tribal ways: To share with one another and take only what they needed to live and to respect the Earth itself. She taught them to respect the spirit of all things: the trees, the rocks, and the creatures, because all have a spiritual dreaming.

Man and woman learned that they were brother and sister and they should support life and learn from each other; that all things had been placed in balance with Mother Earth, and this knowledge must now be passed on to their children and to their children yet to come.

Man and woman were now the custodians of this land.

The great snake went down into the waterhole where she guided the fish and other creatures so that when the Aboriginal people fished they would know to take only what they could eat.

She warned man and woman that if someone should take more than they needed, through greed or for pleasure, they’d know that one dark night the Great Mother Snake would again come out of her hiding place and punish the one who broke this tribal lore.
BACK WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG, a giant Murray cod existed. He was so big that whenever he moved his body he would leave deep tracks right across the land. His huge body knocked down trees and caused massive damage to the land around him.

It didn’t take long before such destruction to the land came to the notice of the Great Spirit himself, and he decided to stop this monster, the Murray cod.

The Great Spirit called two brothers, who were the best in their field, to track down and get rid of the monster cod. The elder brother could track anything across sand, rock, grass, and water, while the younger could hit anything with his spear and boomerang from great distances.

Together the brothers started their search for the monster. With his great skill as a tracker, it did not take long for the elder brother to find the tracks of the monster cod. His destructive path was easy to identify and follow.

But the cunning Murray cod knew he was being hunted and moved west as quickly as his giant body would let him, leaving a great groove in the ground, which quickly filled up with water.

The chase was relentless, but the brothers would not give up. Days went by and great distances were covered before the two brothers finally cornered the monster Murray cod in a place known today as Lake Alexandrina.

The brothers called upon the Great Spirit. “We’ve found him, but what shall we do with such a monster?”

The Great Spirit’s answer was, “Chop the monster cod up into smaller pieces and throw them back into the river that has been created by the chase.”

The brothers did so and soon the monstrous fish was divided up into many pieces, which they then flung back into the water. As soon as a piece of the Murray cod hit the water, it became a freshwater fish, like the yellow belly. Many freshwater fish were created that day and still exist, such as the pomeri (mudfish), tarki (perch), tukkeri (a flat silver fish), kundgulde (butter fish), and mallowe (Murray mouth salmon).
When the brothers came to the head of the Murray cod, they summoned the Great Spirit, once again, asking, “What shall we do with the head?”

The Great Spirit answered, “Just throw the head back into the water.”

This they did. In a flash it turned into the mighty Murray cod that we know today.

The Great Spirit then said, “The Murray cod will never grow to such destructive heights again.” And it was so.

And so the great chase of the monster Murray cod is how the Murray River became a great waterway, back when the world was young.
Boomerang: Alinga, the Lizard Man

A Story from Uluru (Ayers Rock) in the Northern Territory

Retold with permission by Francis Firebrace

AT THE BEGINNING OF TIME, Alinga, the Lizard Man, was a great and powerful warrior. Alinga was known and respected throughout the land for his exceptional skill in boomerang throwing.

Such a giant was Alinga and so powerful was his special boomerang, that sometimes when he threw it, the boomerang would take weeks to come back, sometimes even months. That’s how far he could throw the weapon.

Alinga was a very patient man. Whenever the boomerang disappeared out of sight, he would calmly wait for it, knowing that it would soon return.

One day Alinga took his great boomerang from his possum-skin belt and decided to throw it as far as he could, just to see how far it could go.

He drew his arm a long way back and threw the boomerang, with such force—whrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr— that it disappeared for weeks. The weeks turned into months, the months into years. Still the boomerang did not return.

Alinga was very attached to his special boomerang. Finally, he couldn’t wait any longer for its return, so he decided to go off and search for it.

He walked across vast areas of the desert country, up in the Northern Territory, hunting without success for his boomerang.

While he was searching for his boomerang he had many escapades and adventures, during which he created a lot of special features of the landscape.

He turned south. After many moons had come and gone and he had travelled many hundreds of miles across some of the most inhospitable country in the world, Alinga finally found his boomerang.

It was stuck fast in the ground. After many sandstorms the giant weapon was turned into the enormous rock, right in the centre of Australia, which the Aboriginal people now call Uluru. By this time it had weathered many storms.
Anxious to return to his people, he left the boomerang there, stuck fast in the rock, and started on his long journey back to his people’s camp.

Today you can still see Uluru, the enormous rock, just as it was formed in the desert, back at the beginning of time.
A LONG TIME AGO, back in the Dreamtime, all the creatures of the land could talk with one another. They lived happily together and had no experience of death.

Throughout the summer months, it was the custom of the different tribes—the animals, the birds, and the reptiles—to gather together on the Tongala River (Murray) and enjoy the cool water and the shade of the big, red river gum trees. The wise old men of the tribes would sit and talk, while the younger members enjoyed themselves, swimming and playing.

One day Ghingee, the cockatoo, fell off his perch in a high tree and broke his neck. He lay on the ground, quite dead.

All the animals gathered around to try to wake him. They touched him with a spear, but he could not feel. They opened his eyes, but he could not see. The animals were completely mystified, for they did not understand death.

Then all the medicine men tried to awaken the cockatoo, but without success.

A general meeting was called to discuss the matter of the dead bird.

Youreil, the owl, was called on to speak. Because he had huge round eyes, which could see everything, the owl was supposed to be very wise. But Youreil, the owl, remained silent.

Next the great chief of all the birds, Mullian, the eaglehawk, was asked to explain this mystery of death. Mullian took a pebble and threw it into the river. All the onlookers saw the pebble hit the water and disappear from sight.

Turning to the tribes, Mullian said, “There is the explanation of the mystery. As the pebble has entered on another existence, so has the cockatoo.”
This explanation did not satisfy the gathering, so they next asked Whan, the crow, to speak. Although everyone knew that the crow was a trickster—a very wicked bird—they also knew he possessed great knowledge. The crow stepped forward and took up a wit wit and threw the spear far out into the river. The weapon sank beneath the water. Soon afterward, it gradually rose to the surface.

“There,” Whan declared, “is the great mystery explained. We all go through another world of experience and then return.”

Although this explanation impressed all the tribes, Mullian, the eaglehawk, asked, “Who will volunteer to go through this experience and test it, to see if it is possible to return?”

Certain of the animals and the reptile tribes offered to make the test.

“Very well,” said Mullian, “but you must go through the experience of not being sensible to sight, taste, smell, touch, or hearing, and then return to us in another form.”

When winter arrived, all the creatures that go into holes and hollow logs to sleep during the winter months went away. Among this group were the goanna, the opossum, the wombat, and Dhuran the snake.

The following spring, all the tribes gathered together again to await the return of those who were trying to solve the mystery. At last the goanna, the opossum, the wombat, and the snake returned, all looking half-starved.

When they showed themselves to the gathering, Mullian, the eaglehawk, said, “You have all returned in the same form as you went out, although Dhurran, the snake, has half changed his skin.”

Still, the gathering was anxious to solve the mystery of death. At last, the insect tribe—the moths, waterbugs, and caterpillars—volunteered to try to find a solution to the mystery.

The kookaburra—or laughing jackass as he’s often known—laughed out loud, “Kaw-hahahahaha! Kaw-hahahahaha!”

All the others ridiculed this offer, as the insects had always been looked upon as ignorant and stupid. The insects persisted, so Mullian, the eaglehawk, gave them permission to try.

Now the insects did not crawl away out of sight. The water bugs asked to be wrapped in fine teatree bark and thrown into the river. Other insects asked to be placed in the bark of trees, while others asked to be buried under the ground.
The different bugs and caterpillars promised, “When we return in the springtime, in another form, we will meet you in the mountains.”

The tribes dispersed until the following spring. All the creatures knew when springtime was approaching, by the position of the stars in the night sky. As it grew near time, there was a feeling of great excitement everywhere. Everyone felt that the mystery was about to be solved.

The day before the time fixed for the return of the insects, Mullian sent out message sticks to all the animals, birds, and reptiles. All the creatures of the land traveled to a place in the mountains to await the great event.

That night, the dragonflies, gnats, and fireflies flew around the campfires as heralds of the wonderful pageant that was to take place on the morrow. The dragonflies darted from camp to camp and from tribe to tribe, telling everyone what a marvelous sight it would be to see all the insects returning from the dead in their new bodies.

Already the trees, the shrubs, and the wildflowers had offered to lend themselves for the occasion. The wattle put forth all of its wonderful yellow and green, the waratah its brilliant red, and all the shrubs and wildflowers showed their glorious blossoms in all the colors of the rainbow.

At daybreak the tribes of animals, birds, and reptiles were waiting to witness the arrival of a pageant, the likes of which they had never seen before.

Just as Yhi, the sun, rose over the tops of the hills, the dragonflies came up through the entrance of the mountains leading an array of the most beautiful butterflies. Each species and color came in order.

First the yellow butterflies fluttered up and presented themselves. They fluttered about, finally coming to rest upon the trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. They were followed by butterflies and moths of all the colors of the rainbow: the red butterflies, the blue, the green, and so on, right through all the families of butterflies and moths.

All the creatures of the land were delighted. They gave great cries of admiration as each species arrived. The birds were so pleased that, for the first time ever, they broke forth into song, creating melodious sounds unlike anything known before.

When the last of the butterflies and moths came before the great gathering, they asked, “Have we solved the mystery of death for you? Have we returned in another form?”

And all nature answered back, “You have!”

This sight we still see today at the return of every springtime as did all the creatures in the land, way back in the Dreamtime.
7 Why the Kookaburra Laughs
A Wiradjuri Creation Story from New South Wales

Retold with permission by Pauline E. McLeod

Since the First Time, you should never laugh at a Kookaburra as he heralds in the new day, for he wakens the Sky People, who start the sun every morning.

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG, there was no sun in the sky as we have today. There were only the stars and moon that shone on the Earth. And the stars were the campfires of all the Sky People.

Every day, the Sky People gathered the wood they needed, and every night they began building their campfires. When you look up into the night sky and you see all those little lights, what you are seeing are the campfires of all the Sky People.

Down on Earth, everyone lived in darkness. It was a darkness they did not like at all. This caused them to pick fights for no reason at all, just to have a fight. For example, the emu and the bush turkey were long-time enemies. They fought each other all the time.

The bush turkey would go over to the emu’s nest, find an egg, and throw it up into the air. He’d watch the egg go up into the air and come down in an arc, crashing to pieces on the earth. And the bush turkey did this for no reason whatsoever, just to have a fight.

To retaliate, the emu would grab the bush turkey, pick him up by his neck, swing him around, and let him go, sending him flying through the air.

Then the bush turkey would run over to the emu’s nest and pick up another egg, throw it up into the air, watch it go up, then come down in an arc and crash to pieces on the earth.

One day, the bush turkey picked up the emu’s biggest egg. He threw it up into the air with all his might. This time, instead of circling up into the air and coming back in an arc to smash on the ground, the egg kept on going. It flew higher and higher, up into the air. The egg went so high that it landed on a pile
of wood the Sky People had gathered. The egg cracked open on the wood and a little fire started.

The fire grew and grew. It was beautiful. Soon people on Earth were able to see what a sun in the sky looked like.

For the first time they saw the beautiful colors of the rainbow: all the reds, the blues, all the greens and yellows. And, for the very first time, they felt the heat that radiated from the sun.

The sun is like any fire. It starts off with a little spark early in the morning and it grows and grows. By the middle of the day the fire has grown to its hottest and brightest. Then it slowly goes out. By the end of the day, what you see low on the horizon are the coals or embers of the sun as it slowly goes out.

Down on Earth, the people loved the sun. They cried out to the Sky People, “We like the sun. Bring the sun back every day!”

The Sky People promised they would. Every night they gathered the wood they needed to make the sun glow every day. But there was a problem. The Sky People were not used to getting up every day. Sometimes the sun would shine early in the morning, while at other times it would shine in the afternoon. Sometimes it would not shine at all.

“This is not good!” cried the people on Earth. “We want that sun every day and we want it at the right time!”

So the Sky People came down to Earth to look for someone who could help them wake up regularly every morning. They needed something like an alarm clock.

From far off in the distance, they heard an incredible sound. “Hhaa, hhaa, hhaa”

The Sky People thought, “Maybe that creature can help.” They drew a little closer and it sounded like this: “Aha! Aha! Haaaa!”

“We are sure that creature can help us,” the Sky People said. As they drew even closer, it sounded like this:

“HHHAAAAA. HHHAAAAA, HHHAAAA.”

Someone saw it was the Kookaburra. “Yes, of course, the Kookaburra! He could help us,” said the Sky People.

So they went over to him and said, “Kookaburra, will you help us?”

“Well,” said the Kookaburra, looking at all the Sky People. “What’s in it for me, hey?”

“Did you like the sun in the sky?” asked the Sky People.
“Oh yes, it was the most beautiful sight of all,” answered the Kookaburra. “I really like the beautiful colours I can see because of the sun. All the reds and greens, all the blues and yellows.”

“What else did you like about the sun in the sky?” asked the Sky People.

“Oh, I loved the beautiful warmth that comes from the sun. With it, I warmed my feathers.”

“Would you like that every day?” asked the Sky People.

“Mmmmm,” thought the Kookaburra. “Would you like this?”

“HHHAAAAA! HHHHAAAA! HHHAAA!”

“Yes!” said the Sky People. “Can you do that every day?”

“Of course,” said the Kookaburra.

And from that day to this, the Kookaburra wakes up early every morning and laughs out loud to wake the Sky People, so they can start the sun every day.

You can help the Kookaburra, but there is a rule. You should never make fun of Kookaburras, because if you do, they will never laugh again. They get too embarrassed, and that is the saddest thing to see: Kookaburras who never laugh.

Then who will wake up the Sky People so they can start the sun every day?
The Whale Man and His Canoe
A Story from the Northern Territory
Retold with permission by Francis Firebrace

This story is believed to have originated at the end of the Ice Ages.

BACK IN THE DREAMING, when the world was young, ice melted. The water levels rose and some of the land began to disappear. All the animals wanted to escape to the other side, but no one had a canoe big enough to carry them, except the Whale Man.

The Whale Man was a big fella and he had a huge canoe, but he wouldn’t loan his canoe to anyone. So the animals all met and decided to try to get hold of the Whale Man’s canoe. That way they could go across the waters to reach the land on the other side before it was too late.

So it was arranged. One day, when the Whale Man was walking down the beach, dragging his canoe behind him along the water’s edge, the Starfish Man approached him.

“Hey brother!” he said. “I see some sea lice on your head. Why don’t you come over here to these rocks where I’m sitting and put your head in my lap. I’ll scratch and get rid of some of them and make you feel good. The Whale Man agreed to do this, but because he loved his canoe, he hung on tightly to the bark rope.

The Starfish Man scratched around Whale Man’s ears and made him feel good for a little while. When he was doing this and the Whale Man was preoccupied, the Koala Man sneaked up behind them and cut the bark rope with his knife. He quietly pushed the canoe away and all the other creatures silently crept...
into the boat. Then they gently pushed it into the water and began to paddle off, as quickly as they could. The Koala Man did all the paddling, which developed the muscles on his arms and made them very strong.

Meanwhile, every so often the Whale Man asked, “How’s my canoe there, brother?”

With one hand scratching the Whale Man’s head, the Starfish Man tapped a piece of wood onto the side of the rock they were sitting on with the other hand. “See, that’s your canoe.” This was repeated a few times, but somehow it didn’t sound right.

Sensing that something was wrong, the Whale Man suddenly jumped to his feet. He looked across the waters to see his beloved canoe disappearing over the horizon, and realised he’d been tricked.

This deception made the Whale Man extremely angry. He struck the Starfish Man, who managed to counter with one tremendous blow. The force of the impact opened a hole in the Whale Man’s head, but Whale Man was very powerful. He pounded the Starfish Man until he fell senseless onto a rock, from which he slid onto the sand. There he lies to this day, all squashed out in the water.

Whale Man quickly turned, dived into the water, and swam swiftly after the disappearing canoe. By the time he’d reached the other side, Koala Man and all the other creatures had long since disappeared. Before they left, they pushed the canoe off into the water and it floated away. It’s still floating out there, somewhere, around the coast of Australia.

Whale Man never gave up hunting for his canoe. To this day, he swims around and around Australia, still searching the oceans for his stolen canoe.

You can see him swimming out there, spouting water through the hole in his head, made by the Starfish Man when they fought that day, way back in the Dreamtime.
9 How the Birds Got Their Colors
A Wiradjuri Story from New South Wales

Retold with permission by Pauline E. McLeod

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG, a beautiful arch appeared in the sky. This arch, which was the rainbow, seemed to take color from all around. There were all the reds, the blues, greens, yellows, and purples. It kept on growing and growing, right before your very eyes.

Slowly the arch of the rainbow began to pulsate as it grew larger. Then, finally, it exploded! The rainbow became a million pieces that floated in the air as they slowly drifted toward the ground.

As the million colorful pieces of the rainbow fell toward the ground, the pieces changed into all the birds we know today.
Some of the birds, like the crow, didn’t like the feeling of falling, and they screamed out in horror, like this: “Aaahhhhh! Aaahhhhh! Aaahhhhh!”

Other birds thought it was the funniest feeling they ever had and started to laugh, “Haaaaaa! Haaaaaa! Haaaaaa!” just like the Kookaburra.

Still others thought it was the most beautiful feeling of all, so they spread their wings wide, opened their throats, and started to sing the most beautiful songs you could ever hear.

That is how the birds got their colors and their voices—because of that rainbow, way back in the Dreamtime.
Born of a mother duck and a father water rat, the platypus is rejected from his birth and considered different. His mother travels east with him until they find a place of safety and acceptance in the Blue Mountain ranges.

BACK IN THE DREAMING, the Narran Lake was such a lovely place to live. It was always full of lovely, clear water, and all our waterbirds lived there, as they still do today.

There were beautiful black swans, pelicans, cranes, little water hens (with their red feet), and the ducks. They all lived happily together on the beautiful lake.

Now the family of ducks had a beautiful daughter, whose name was Gaygar. Every day, Gaygar would swim with her friends. She was so happy to float and splash around and feel the warmth of the sun on her face, as she floated on the lovely, cool, clear water.

Every day, the old grandmothers and mothers would warn the ducklings, “Don’t you girls go swimming too far away. The Waaway might get you. And them old fellas are watching you girls, all the time. They might coax you away.”

Gaygar and her friends would always swim a little way up the Narran River and float back downstream into the lake.

One day, as they were floating and swimming back to the lake, Gaygar saw some nice green shoots of grass on the riverbank. She got out of the water to gather some shoots to eat while her friends were laughing and splashing around in the water.

As she was eating the lovely green shoots, something suddenly grabbed her and dragged her away. Gaygar thought the Waaway had her, but, when she looked up, she saw Bigoon, the big, old, ugly water rat.
Poor little Gaygar! She tried to scream, “Please let me go!”

But Bigoon had his hand over her mouth and began to tie her up with vines.

“Please let me go!” she cried again.

Bigoon said, “No. I have been watching you girls swim every day. I’ve fallen in love with you. I want you for my wife.”

“No! Please! Let me go back to my people. My tribe has a husband picked out for me. I’m going to be with him soon.”

But Bigoon ignored her cries and threatened, “I will kill you with the spear I always carry. I have this boondi too.”

He dragged little Gaygar around the bend of the river to where he lived in a hole. It was a sort of dark cave in the bank of the river.

Gaygar could hear her people cooee out to her, “COOEE, GAYGAR! COOEE, GAYGAR!” they would cry.

But she couldn’t answer, because Bigoon kept Gaygar tied up with vines. He would untie her only at night to let her have a swim. He wouldn’t even sleep because he wanted to watch her all the time.

Little Gaygar wondered, “How will I ever get away from this old fella?” She thought long and hard about how to get away.

One day, she said, to herself, “I know. I will make out that I like it here, with this nasty old fella.” So, Gaygar put on a happy face and started to sing.

Old Bigoon heard her singing and thought, “Hey! She must like it here with me. She must love me too. Now I will untie her.” Bigoon really believed Gaygar would never leave him. When he untied her, he went and lay down. He fell into a deep sleep.

Gaygar waited until she heard him snoring. She sneaked outside, dived into the river, and started to swim quickly downstream, back to her people on the lake.

When her wings grew tired of swimming, she got out and began to fly, back to where her home was on the lake. When her wings again grew tired, she landed and started to run. A couple of times she thought she heard twigs breaking behind her.

Suddenly, Gaygar saw her people, farther down the river and on the lake.

“COOEE!” she called, and yelled out to them happily, “Hey! It’s Gaygar! I’m back.”

Everyone ran toward her and they all gathered around Gaygar. They were so happy to see her again. The old grandmothers and mothers said, “There you are. You girls, we told you not to go too far away. We said the old Waaway would get you one day.”

Little Gaygar corrected them, “No, it wasn’t the Waaway. It was Bigoon, the big, old, ugly water rat.”

So once again life settled down on the lake. Gaygar was so happy to be back with her family and friends, swimming every day and feeling the warmth of the sun on her face as she floated around.

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The Tales
Then there came the time for all the ducks to make their nests around the lake.

“Come on Gaygar, you make your nest too,” she was told.

Some made their nests in the reeds that grow around the lake. Others made them in the Mariah bushes. After a time there was so much excitement because out hatched all the lovely little ducklings with their nice, soft, fluffy feathers.

“Hey, where’s Gaygar?” they called. “Come on Gaygar, bring your babies out! Teach them to love the water, like we do.”

But Gaygar held back because she knew her babies were different.

When she finally brought her babies out, everyone was frightened and started to scream, “Kill them! Kill them! Dibble! Dibble them in!”

They were so frightened! Instead of the lovely soft feathers, Gaygar’s babies were covered in fur. They had a duck’s bill, but instead of having two webbed feet, they had four, and Bigoon’s sharp spear was in their hind feet.

Everyone was so afraid. The elders said to Gaygar’s father, “We will have to kill her babies because they don’t belong to our tribe. They belong to Bigoon’s tribe. They will bring us bad luck.”

“Please don’t kill my babies,” Gaygar begged, “I love them. I will look after them.”

Gaygar’s father said, firmly, “You will have to go, or the others will kill us all.”

So poor little Gaygar had to leave her home on the beautiful Narran Lake and try to find somewhere else to live, where her babies would be accepted.

Her father told her, “Go on the Big Warrambool, to the Barwon.”

She was so sad. When she got to the Barwon River, Gaygar flew up above the trees. She saw some mountains a long way away off and she thought, “I will go to those mountains in the morning.”

While she was sitting down with her children, another tribe of friendly ducks came along and said, “Hey Gaygar, what are you doing here? You belong on the Narran Lake.”

She replied, “I want to go to those mountains. Please tell me how to get there.”

The friendly ducks said, “Don’t go to those mountains, they are called the Warrumbungles. The river that runs from there runs only after big rains. We see the Aborigines digging in the sand to get their water. That river runs upside down.”

“You go down this big river. There you will find a stream that will take you through the reed beds. You follow the river and it will take you right away.”

Next morning, little Gaygar went down the Barwon River with her children and found the stream that went through the reed beds, now called the Macquarie Marshes. It led on to the river, which flowed past Warren, Narromine, Dubbo, and Wellington.
The farther Gaygar went, the colder the water became. She began thinking of home on the beautiful Narren Lake. Her heart was aching from remembering her happy days, when she would swim with her friends and float with the warmth of the sun shining on her face.

But her children began looking at their mother and saying, “Look at our mother, she is different from us.” And away in those cold mountain streams, little Gaygar died of a broken heart.

Gaygar’s children loved the cold mountain streams; they thrived and multiplied and moved to wherever the waters of the Macquarie River took them.

Now, you will never see a duck with four feet and, never will a water rat lay eggs.

This story tells us why we don’t have the platypus in our rivers and creeks, out in this part of northwestern New South Wales. There’s none in the Barwon or Darling rivers. They are not in the Culgoa River, and there’s none in the Birrie or Bokhara rivers either.

Nor are they at the Narran Lake or the Narran River, because the little mother duck, Gaygar, took them away from the Narran Lake a long, long time ago, way back in the Dreaming.
WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG, the gentle Kangaroo Mother, like all mothers, was always looking after Joey, her young baby. Young Joey was like most children. As soon as his mother’s back was turned, he’d disappear to do his own thing, and Joey’s mother constantly had to look for him.

One day, as the gentle Kangaroo Mother was in the plains feeding and looking after young Joey, a weak, old, wobbly wombat came walking along in her direction. He was whingeing and whining, saying, “I am weak and old. I am blind. I haven’t got a friend in the whole, wide world and I haven’t eaten, or had anything to drink, in days!”

“Ooh!” said the gentle Kangaroo Mother, “Why don’t you cheer up, it could be worse!”

But, even in those days, nobody cheered up just because they were told to cheer up!

“What?” said the weak, old, wobbly wombat. “Didn’t you hear me? I am weak and I am old. I haven’t a friend in the whole, wide world. I haven’t eaten or had anything to drink in days!”

“I tell you what,” said the gentle Kangaroo Mother, patiently, “I’ll be your friend and lead you to some nice, cool water. You just grab hold of my tail.”

But the weak, old, wobbly wombat let go of the tail many times. Soon the gentle Kangaroo Mother was gently pushing and shoving the old wombat, until they got to where the water was. There the weak, old, wobbly wombat drank . . . and drank . . . and drank. He was very, very, thirsty.

When he finished, the Kangaroo Mother said, “Grab hold of my tail again and I’ll lead you to some nice, juicy, green grass!”

But the weak, old, wobbly wombat let go of the tail many times. Soon the Kangaroo Mother was gently pushing and shoving the old wombat, until they got to where the grass was. There, the old wombat munched away.
Suddenly, the gentle Kangaroo Mother stood up. She remembered her Joey and bounded back across the plains to where she had left him. Sure enough, young Joey had disappeared just like children once their mother’s back is turned.

The desperate Kangaroo Mother had to search everywhere for her Joey. She searched all over the plains, up and down the hills and around the bushes and shrubs. She went in and out of the caves and she even asked the other animals if they had seen her Joey, but none had.

She was about to panic when she finally found him, safe and fast asleep, under an old gum tree. The gentle Kangaroo Mother thought, “I won’t disturb him. I’ll leave him there, fast asleep,” and she bounded back across the plains, to where she had left the old wombat.

Suddenly, the Kangaroo Mother stopped. Her nose twitched as she smelt the air around her. She sensed danger! Then, she saw Him. He was a hunter and he was looking at the old wombat.

The gentle Kangaroo Mother was determined to save the old wombat. With a mighty kangaroo jump, she led him away and the chase was on. The hunter tracked the kangaroo across the plains, over the hills, around the shrubs and bushes, in and out of the caves.

After a time, the hunter lost the kangaroo. The hunter was sad. There would be no kangaroo for dinner. Not even, a weak, old, wobbly wombat. He gave up and went home, empty handed.

The Kangaroo Mother waited until the hunter had gone. Then, worried that maybe the hunter had found her young Joey, she came out of the cave she was hiding in and went to search for him. Back to the old gum tree she hurried. There, still fast asleep, lay her Joey.
The Kangaroo Mother went over to him. Ever so gently, she woke him up. Then together they bounded across the plains to where she had left the weak, old, wobbly wombat. They had to go very slowly. In those days, kangaroos did not have pouches and young Joeys could not jump as far or as fast as their mothers could.

It took them a long time to cross the plains to where she had left the old wombat. By the time they got there, the weak, old, wobbly wombat was nowhere to be seen. He had completely disappeared.

They searched everywhere for him, up and down the hills, around the shrubs and bushes, in and out of the caves. But they could not find him. In the end, the gentle Kangaroo Mother said, “The wombat must have gone home!” She grabbed hold of young Joey and they returned to their favorite grasses on the plains.

What the Kangaroo Mother didn’t know, was that the weak, old, wobbly wombat was not a wombat after all. He was, in fact, Biamee, the Creator Spirit, who came down to Earth to find the gentlest creature here.

Biamee found her, of course, through the gentle Kangaroo Mother’s kindness to him and he rewarded her by giving her a dilly bag. You know, a grass shopping bag, which the Kangaroo Mother tied around her waist. As soon as she had done that, Biamee, the Creator Spirit, turned it magically into a pouch.

Young Joey now had a pouch where he could peak out and see the rest of the world. Or he could hide really quickly in the safety of his mother and fall asleep in his mother’s warm pouch in real comfort.

When the Kangaroo Mother thought about her pouch she said, “This really isn’t fair! I am the only kangaroo with a pouch. What about my cousins and relatives? What about the wallabys, and the rat kangaroos? What about them?”

Biamee agreed with the Kangaroo Mother and, because she thought of others, Biamee allowed pouches to grow on all the gentle marsupial mothers throughout the whole world.

So, because of that gentle Kangaroo Mother’s kindness, all the kangaroos gained pouches, way back when the world was young.
The Little Flying Fox
A Creation Story from New South Wales North Coast

Retold with permission by Pauline E. McLeod

In this story of the little flying fox, there are sixteen to twenty lessons. It is not the storyteller’s responsibility to tell you what they are, but the listener’s task to find the lessons hidden within the story.

HAVE YOU EVER seen a flying fox? Well . . . he has a body of a bat, the head of a fox, and he only eats the fruit of a tree. When he is on the ground he screeches and hollers, gets underfoot, and trips people all the time.

A long way back in the Dreaming, the Little Flying Fox thought he was a bird and not a bat. It was during the time when the Great Spirit came down to Earth to teach all the birds how to be birds. Things like how to fly, to sing, to make nests and lay eggs, and do all those “birdie” things.

The Little Flying Fox went over to Great Spirit, getting underfoot, tripping him, and screaming out, “Teach me! Teach me! Teach me how to be a bird!”

Great Spirit said, “Hey, Flying Fox! You are not a bird. You are a bat! Wait over there, and when I am finished with all the birds, I will teach you how to be a bat.”

But the Little Flying Fox wouldn’t listen, he kept getting under the feet of Great Spirit, tripping him, screaming out, “Teach me! Teach me! Teach me how to be a bird! I’ve got wings—I can fly! Teach me how to be a bird, right now!”

Well . . . the Great Spirit looked at the Little Flying Fox and said, “Flying Fox, you are not a bird, but a bat. You wait over there, and when I am finished with all the birds, I will teach you everything you need to know about how to be a bat.”

The Little Flying Fox just would not listen. He kept on getting under the feet of Great Spirit, tripping him and screaming out, “You teach me! Teach me how to be a bird. I’ve got wings! I can fly! You teach me how to be a bird right now, or I’ll hold my breath until I turn blue!”

And he held his breath, slowly turning blue.

“Flying Fox!” cried Great Spirit, “That is no way to behave. Now I must teach you a lesson.”
Great Spirit went over to the Little Flying Fox and picked him up by his feet, went to the nearest tree, and hung him upside down in the branch of the tree. Not the right way round like all the birds. But upside down!

Great Spirit left him there and went back to all the birds to teach them everything they needed to know about how to be birds.

Meanwhile, the Little Flying Fox was so embarrassed about being hung upside down that he held his hands together, clicking his thumbs, saying to anyone who would listen, “I don’t care, I could hang upside down all the time if I wanted to!”

When the Great Spirit was finished with all the birds, he went over to where the Little Flying Fox was hanging in the tree and asked, “Flying Fox, have you learned your lesson? Do you know that you are not a bird, but a bat?”

Well . . . the Little Flying Fox was so cheeky, he said, “I don’t care. I can hang upside down all the time, if I want to. I still think I am a bird, you know!”

When Great Spirit heard that, he said, “OK Flying Fox, if that’s the way you are going to be, then that’s the way you will be.

“From now on, and forever, you will hang upside down in the branches of trees, to remind yourself, first, that you are a bat and not a bird, and second, to keep you from getting underfoot.”

And from that day to this, all flying foxes hang upside down in the branches of trees because of that cheeky little fellow, way back in the Dreaming.

The Little Flying Fox
A LONG TIME AGO, when the world was young, Koolah, the koala, and Euro, the wallaby, were the best of friends.

They shared the same bark shelter—known as a goondi—and always went hunting together with their boomerangs and boondis. Both were proud of their long tails.

At this time, there was a drought over all the land. Water was scarce, and grass withered and died. Some days, huge banks of dark clouds would float across the western sky, promising heavy rains, but the next day the sky would clear as before.

The two friends were camped by a gilghi. They were used to the beautiful clear springs in the Warrumbungles, but here at this gilghi the little water that was left had become stagnant. It made them sick, but it saved them from dying of thirst.

Finally, the remaining stagnant water dried up and the two friends became desperate. Euro said to Koolah, “I remember, there was a big drought like this when my mother carried me in her pouch. Birds fell from the trees and many creatures died around waterholes and gilghis. It was so bad, even trees withered up and died.

“My mother traveled a long way, with me in her pouch. Across the plains, we passed the dry reed beds and the Martharguy. All the rivers and creeks were dry. She traveled slowly because hunger and thirst were making her weak and I was heavy to carry.

“Then, her cousin Bundah, the old man kangaroo, said to my mother ‘Why do you carry such a heavy load? You will die. Throw him into Nie bush and come with me. I will travel fast and take you to water.’

“But my mother wouldn’t leave me to die. She struggled on without any help, even though I was a heavy burden for her to carry. Old Bundah just went on ahead, leaving her to die from thirst.

“Soon she came to a sandy riverbed. She dug a deep hole in the sand. Slowly, it filled with cool, clear water. We camped by this waterhole until the rains came.”
“If we stay here, Koolah, we will perish from thirst. I will take you to that river,” promised Euro. “We will dig a big hole in the sand and find water.”

Koolah was happy with Euro’s suggestion and said, “Yes, let us both go to that riverbed. I have very strong arms and I will help you.”

Slowly they made their way over the plains, crossing many dry creeks and waterholes. Before they reached the river they were looking for, they found the remains of some of their friends who had died of thirst. This made them more determined to survive.

The sun was blazing hot, and they were very tired when they reached the sandy river. Koolah suggested that Euro should start digging. He knew more about finding water. Euro willingly went to work and dug a deep hole, but there was no sign of water. Exhausted from all the digging he had done, Euro asked Koolah to help him.

Koolah was very cunning and said, “I would gladly help, but I’m feeling very sick. The sun is so hot. I’m afraid I’m going to die.”

Euro was sorry for his friend. He set to work again without complaining. At last he saw a tiny trickle of water appear in the hole. Slowly it filled with lovely cool, clear water. Euro was happy.

He went over to his friend, little Koolah, and said, “I have found water. Would you like me to bring some to you?”

But Koolah was only gammon. Without even answering, he jumped up and ran straight to the waterhole. Euro was so surprised. When Koolah bent down to drink the water out of the hole, his tail stuck out like a dry stick.

Seeing that, Euro became angry. He could now see how cunning his friend was. Angrily, he grabbed his boomerang with the sharp edge and cut off Koolah’s tail.

To this day, because he was so lazy and cunning, Koolah, the koala, has no tail. The wallabies and kangaroos continue to hop across the land with their long tails. But their little koala friend climbed up into the big gum trees and has lived there ever since.
Little Koala

by

June E. Barker

Little Koala we all love you, Boy.
You're so soft and gentle
and so friendly too.
You’re the children’s playmate,
You’re our mascot true,
Little Koala; we all love you.
Sleeping in the sunlight
with your eyes shut tight,
Out for fun and frolic
All through the night.
Great big ears, for secrets,
Pouch for baby small.
Ending up this story,
With no tail at all.
Pikkuw (pronounced Pikawi) is a story of how the crocodile came to be, following the breaking of solemn tribal lore about married women.

A LONG TIME AGO, back in the Dreaming, there lived a tribe on the banks of a river up in the Cape York area. Among this tribe was a tall, handsome fella named Pikkuw, who had fallen in love with a beautiful married woman.

Pikkuw knew it was against tribal law to mess around with a married woman. He was warned several times by the tribal elders that it was a very serious offence. These men knew that the woman’s husband was, by now, very upset about Pikkuw’s misbehaviour.

But Pikkuw did not heed their warning. Once again he was caught with the woman on the banks of the river. The old men called the elders for a meeting and sat down in a circle to discuss what to do. After much discussion, they eventually decided that Pikkuw had been warned enough. The severe punishment for this offence must be carried out.

Armed with their spears, the woman’s husband and some of his relatives went down to the riverbank. As they approached, Pikkuw saw them coming. He jumped up, leaving the woman, and ran toward the river to escape. But he was not fast enough. Swiftly, the men threw their spears and some lodged in his spine.

Badly wounded, Pikkuw staggered forward, fell headlong into the murky waters of the river, and disappeared. The people of his tribe thought that Pikkuw was gone forever.

But it was not to be so. One dark night, the murky waters of the river stirred. Out on to its bank crawled a large, fearsome creature.

When the people looked at Pikkuw, the crocodile, they could see the spearheads that remained in his spine, although the shafts had rotted away.

These spearheads are a reminder from the Great Spirit to all people of the solemn tribal law that says they must not mess around with married women or interfere with other people’s relationships.
From above, the Great Spirit called out, “Pikkuw, because you have broken tribal lore, you have now become a crocodile. From now on, your children and their children are all cursed to become crocodiles. You will be allowed to come up on to the bank a short way, but if you come any farther than that, we will kill you again, as we did before, back in the Dreaming.”
Goolbree—How the Emu Lost Its Wings

A Story from Northwestern New South Wales

Retold with permission by June E. Barker

A LONG TIME AGO, in the Dreamtime, emus were huge birds that had big wings, with beautiful feathers.

One old man emu was named Goolbree. He was tall, strong, and held his head high. Because they were the best to be seen on the plains, Goolbree was proud of his beautiful feathers. There was one thing wrong with old Goolbree. He was a very nasty old fella and was always playing tricks on others. Old Goolbree was very jealous of the flock of beautiful Brolgas that camped not too far away. He hated to see them happy and dancing. When the Brolgas knew he was watching them, they would dance even more gracefully.

That beautiful dance would make old Goolbree wild, and he would become even angrier, trying to peck at them whenever they were passing.

It was the same with the Kookaburras. He didn’t like to see them or hear their laughter from the big gum trees. Old Goolbree always called them names, like “googlee eyes.” He kept trying to kick sand at the Kookaburras or many other little birds.

Bundah, the big grey kangaroo, was the only creature old Goolbree was not cheeky to. This was because Bundah was as tall as Goolbree, who was frightened of the kangaroo’s strong tail and his long, sharp claws.

Old Goolbree became cheekier and more aggressive toward the others. In the camp, his manners were no better. Daily he would send his wives and all the little dennewans out looking for quongdongs and other wild berries, even though he knew, the closest quongdong tree was many miles away.
The dennewans all knew the quongdongs were his favorite of the wild fruits and berries. They walked and walked for miles, but found no quongdongs.

One day, when they had walked for miles across the plains seeking to gather food, a big rainstorm came up. It rained and rained. The rain pelted down and, as there was no shelter, the old wives and little dennewans were soaked to the skin. There was not a dry feather on their bodies.

When they returned to camp, they were horrified to find their eggs lying out of their nests, wet and uncovered. Old Goolbree just laughed when they questioned why he left the nests uncovered and said nasty things to them. He boasted about stealing wood from the pelicans.

In order to dry their feathers, the wives had to make a fire. They gathered all the dry sticks they could find and made a really big fire.

When old Goolbree came over to get warm, they chased him away. When he wouldn’t stay away, they angrily kicked the fire and coals all over him. Unfortunately, all his fine feathers were singed and his wings were burnt down to stumps.

As old Goolbree was sneaking off, the Broglas came by. When they saw his stumpy wings, they danced with joy. The Kookaburras also laughed and laughed, from the top of the big gum trees.

Some of the fire must have scorched the eggs a little, because since that day, all emus have stumpy wings. After that day, Old Goolbree changed and he now helps his wife to look after the nest.

Today, if anyone’s hunting or searching for emu eggs, old Goolbree, the male emu, will lead them away from the nest. Many people don’t know that where he just ran from, the emu mother is sitting on a nest of eggs.
This is the story of what the non-native people call Didgeridoo and the Aboriginal people from the Gulf Country call Yidiki.

LONG AGO IN THE DREAMING, a man called Yidiki, who was a brave warrior, was coming home from the hunt when he saw lying on the ground at his feet a hollow branch, blown down from a tree by a fierce storm. The limb’s larger end was crawling with masses of tiny white termites. Termites are white ants that live on the sap in the branches of trees.

Now, curious, Yidiki picked up the hollow branch and blew through the smaller end to get rid of the all the termites. In doing so, the branch made a strange and powerful sound.

His interest grew. Quickly, he made a fire. By putting hot embers down the branch he burned out the rest of the termites’ nest. This made the branch completely hollow.

He then went to a place where there were wild bees and he gathered some wax from their hive. This wax he molded and shaped inside the smaller end of the branch to fit his mouth.

Yidiki found that, by practicing breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth at the same time, he could make rhythms, as well as many bird sounds and other animal sounds.

By now he was very excited, so he took this discovery back to his tribe. When they heard Yidiki play this new instrument, they too were drawn to the sounds it made.

They painted themselves up in their ochre and danced to the rhythm of the hollow branch. In time it became very popular and was used for sacred ceremonies and also for healing, among other things.
During his lifetime, Yidiki the warrior taught many other young men how to play the hollow log, by breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth at the same time.

When Yidiki died, his spirit went into the hollow branch. Now, because there is a male spirit inside, the Yidiki can only be played by men. If a woman should try to play this wooden instrument, bad spirits will cause her to have a deformed child and other sorry business.

If you listen to this natural instrument, the sounds will reach and open your heart and lift your spirits, as they have done for the Aboriginal people since the beginning of time.
A LONG TIME AGO, the Ngemba tribe had a camp between the two rivers. Each day the women and the men of the tribe would go out hunting and gathering food.

The women would take their coolamons and yam sticks, which they used to dig up yams, wichetty grubs, porcupines, and small lizards. They gathered all sorts of wild fruits and berries, which they carried back to the camp in their bark coolamons.

Armed with their spears and clubs, the men went hunting for emus and kangaroos, or sometimes fish, which they carried back to the camp to share amongst the tribe.

While they were busy, the children were left in the care of their grandmothers until their parents returned.

In all the tribes, there was a Wirrigan, a clever fella. He was a sort of witch doctor or trickster who could do all sorts of clever things. A Wirrigan could turn himself into whatever he wanted to be.

The Ngemba tribe’s Wirrigan was a nasty, wicked old man. Most of all, he didn’t like little children, especially when they were playing happily together.

One day, while the parents were away collecting food for the tribe, the children, who were playing together, looked up and saw a big boolie boolie—a whirlie wind—rushing toward them.

Closer and closer to them it whirled. As it drew nearer, the children became frightened. They began to run back to the camp. The boolie boolie came closer, now whirling faster than ever.

Screaming with fright, the children ran as fast as they could for the safety of the camp. But one poor little boy couldn’t run as fast as the rest of the children. The big boolie boolie whirled around him, swept him up, and carried him away. When they realised what had happened, everyone in the camp felt so sad.
Later, as their parents returned from collecting their food, they were surprised to find their children upset and crying. When asked what was wrong, their grandmothers said, “A big boolie boolie came whirling across the plains. One little boy couldn’t run as fast as the other children and the boolie boolie just carried him away. We can’t find him anywhere.”

But the fathers suspected that something was wrong. “Sounds like the nasty old Wirrigan changed into a boolie boolie,” they said. The men searched the camp for him but couldn’t find any trace of him.

The elders said, “We must get rid of that Wirrigan. We don’t want him in our camp any more.”

“But we must be careful,” one elder warned. “That old Wirrigan is very cunning. He carries his spears and clubs with him all the time.”

“He also has a little bag of buntha buntha poison, which he might throw on us and kill us,” said another.

With their heads bowed down, the sad old elders were sitting down in a circle, discussing ways to get rid of the Wirrigan.

Hearing a noise, they looked up to see some men of the Muruwarri tribe coming toward them. “Where are you going?” they asked the Muruwarri men.

“We are going to Brewarrina, to the stone fish traps,” they answered. “We received the message sticks that say there is plenty of fish in the traps to share.”

“But why do you look so sad?” asked one of the Muruwarri men.

“One of our little boys is missing,” the Ngemba father answered. “The wicked Wirrigan turned himself into a boolie boolie today and carried my little boy away. We don’t want that Wirrigan to stay with us anymore. But he’s such a cunning old man, we don’t know what to do to get rid of him.”

“Let us talk with our tribe’s Wirrigan. He’s here with us and will tell us what you need to do,” the leader of the Muruwarris said, and he rejoined his hunting party.

When he returned, he said, “On our way here, we gathered gum from the marnghi trees, growing on the Culgoa, the Birrie, and the Bokhara rivers. We have two big balls of gum. These will help when you catch the old Wirrigan tonight.”

Now the old Wirrigan always complained of his aching back, and the Ngemba men knew that he always enjoyed having his back rubbed alongside the warmth of the fire.

As they rubbed his back with emu fat and goanna oil, the old Wirrigan couldn’t see the nardoo stone beside the fire. He didn’t suspect they had two big balls of hot gum on the hot stone.

“Turn over onto your back now, old fella,” they said. When the Wirrigan turned over, with his eyes still closed, they quickly put the hot balls of gum on both of his eyes.

With this, the Wirrigan screamed, “Yukai! Yukai! Oh dear! Oh dear! The pain!”
He screamed and screeched as he jumped in the air. Everyone was waiting for him to fall down on the ground, but he kept on jumping and screaming. Then he disappeared.

It was a dark night, and everything around the camp was quiet. In the deep silence, the elders were beginning to feel frightened and uneasy.

All of a sudden, out of the darkness, they heard a strange sound. A sound like they had never heard before. “Mooke Pooke! Mooke Pooke!”

Looking up into the trees where the sound came from, all they could see were two big googly eyes looking down at them. The Wirrigan had turned himself into a night owl.

If you go out into the bush or your garden at night and you hear “Mooke Pooke, Mooke Pooke,” look up into the trees and you will see the night owl.

Take a closer look. You will see that the color of those hot balls of gum is still around his eyes.

That’s how the night owl came to be, a long time ago, back when the world was young.
A LONG TIME AGO, back in the Dreaming, the Bogong Moth was a man. He was just very ordinary; a dull gray color. But he had a wife, called Myee, whose wings were all the colors of the rainbow. She was a beautiful woman and highly inquisitive.

And so it was that Myee said to her husband, “Bogong, I would like to go to that mountain over there, to look at that beautiful white stuff on top. It looks interesting.”

But her husband was very wise and advised his wife, “Stay away from that white stuff. It is very cold and could prove dangerous for our type of people. Besides, it’s a long way, much farther than you think.”

One day, when the Bogong Moth Man was out hunting, Myee became very inquisitive. Her curiosity was so overpowering that she ignored her husband’s advice and took to the air, with her lovely wings that were all the colors of the rainbow. She flew as fast as she could toward the white stuff on top of the distant mountain.

Just as her husband had said, she found that, indeed, it was a long way. By the time she got there, the shadows were growing long. She was very tired and she needed to rest.

It began to snow. The soft snowflakes knocked the female moth down and held her fast to the side of the mountain. There, Myee was held prisoner until the spring rains came and sunshine melted the layers of ice and snow, freeing the moth.
When Myee emerged, gone were all the wonderful colors in her wings. She was now just a dull, drab, gray color, like her husband, Bogong. But, where the moth had lain on the mountain, trapped in the snow that finally melted and ran down the side of the mountain, there grew masses of wonderful flowers that were all the brilliant colors of the rainbow.

So the next time you are up in the mountains and see those colorful flowers, think about Myee, wife of Bogong, whose curiosity cost her all the beautiful colors in her wings.
IN THE DAYS LONG AGO, a stream fed from the Blue Mountains into the Murray River. As we know, all streams have bubbles in them. But in this stream, the bubbles were ALIVE. They were the little crystal homes of Water Spirits.

There was one little Water Spirit who wanted to be free so it could dance and play with all the other creatures. It wished, and wished, and wished. It wished so much that it turned into a little green creature. But still it could not escape from its crystal home.

The Lyrebird would come down to the stream every day to have a drink. It was used to seeing all the bubbles. But on this one day in spring, it noticed that one of the bubbles was green. So it sang to it and the little green bubble danced to the Lyrebird’s music. It dived deep into the waters and came out with a magical splash, and dived again and again, for quite some time.

Eventually, the Lyrebird became bored and was about to go home, when the Great Spirit spoke to him, saying, “Lyrebird! Lyrebird! Go back to the little green bubble and sing to it. One of my creatures wants to be free. Only your voice can set it free. Go on, Lyrebird, go back and sing!”

Feeling very important, the Lyrebird went back to the little green bubble and started to sing. He sang and sang and sang. He sang until he was about to burst, then he sang some more.

Suddenly, the bubble popped! Out jumped a Little Green Frog. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out; not a whisper; not a sound.

“Oh!” said the Lyrebird. “Everything makes a sound. Try again.”

The Little Green Frog tried. It opened its mouth once again, but still nothing came out. Not a whisper, not even a tiny sound.

“Ha!” said the Lyrebird in disgust.

He was about to go home, when the Great Spirit spoke again. “Lyrebird! Lyrebird! Go back to the Little Green Frog and teach him how to sing. He’ll be a good student. He will listen and learn. I know you will be a good teacher. Go on, teach him how to sing.”
So, feeling very important, Lyrebird went back to teach the Little Green Frog.

Day after day, season after season, the Lyrebird would go down to the stream to teach the Little Green Frog how to sing, and the Little Green Frog would always be there, to listen and to learn.

One day, the Little Green Frog decided to play a trick on the Lyrebird. So the Little Green Frog hid from the Lyrebird.

The Lyrebird went down to the stream as he had done so many times before and was very surprised. The Little Green Frog was nowhere to be seen.

The Lyrebird searched everywhere for the Little Green Frog but could not find him anywhere. Just when the Lyrebird had decided to give up and go home, he heard his brother calling him. He turned but could not see anyone.

The Lyrebird heard his brother’s voice again and turned. This time, he saw where the Little Green Frog was hiding. The frog was laughing.

“So you have learnt to throw your voice, have you?” said the Lyrebird, “That is good. For it is time for you to be heard by everyone else.”

The Lyrebird was so proud of his student that he forgot all about his own singing and called out to all the creatures, “Come! Come and listen to the Little Green Frog!”
That night, when the moon was high, all the animals, all the birds, and all the other creatures gathered around the stream. But there was no Little Green Frog to be seen. He was fast asleep. The Lyrebird knew that when the Little Green Frog sleeps, he sleeps with all the other Water Spirits.

So the Lyrebird went to the water’s edge and called out, “Little Green Frog, wake up! They are all here, waiting for you.”

Before long, the bulging eyes of the Little Green Frog appeared in the water. He jumped up onto his lily pad and puffed out his chest.

When all the animals, all the birds, and all the other creatures saw him, they laughed and said, “What is this, Lyrebird? You asked us here to look at this strange little creature that looks like a bloated green man?”

“No!” said the Lyrebird, “You are not here to look at him; you are here to listen!”

Throughout that night, the music that came from the Little Green Frog was magical. The songs he sang contained all the sounds of nature, like wind in the trees, the songs of all the birds, and the sounds of all the other animals. He finally made the most beautiful sound of all, the sound of rain landing on hard, dry, parched earth.

When the Little Green Frog finished and all the animals, all the birds, and all the other creatures had returned home, the Lyrebird went over to his student and said, “I am so proud of you! You know? You sing better than I do.”

When he said that, the Little Green Frog became so embarrassed. He dived deep into the water of the stream and waited until the Lyrebird had gone home. Then he jumped up on his favorite lily pad, puffed out his chest, and said, “I am the greatest singer in the whole world! I sing better than the Lyrebird!”

The Little Green Frog was very lonely, all by himself in the stream, so the Great Spirit created another frog to be his wife.

“I am the greatest singer in the whole wide world!” boasted the Little Green Frog to his wife. “If I wanted to, I could sing the moon down from the sky.”

“Go on, I dare you!” said his wife. “Go ahead and try!”

So the Little Green Frog sat on his lily pad, puffed out his chest, and sang and sang and sang. He sang until he was about to burst. Then he sang some more.

But the moon just sailed right on by. It didn’t listen to a note.

But that Little Green Frog would not give up, and he tried again. He sang and he sang and he sang, he sang until he was about to burst. Then he sang some more.

Suddenly, his voice went “CROAK!” And that is the only sound that came out of his mouth.

From that day to this, the only song all the Little Green Frogs are able to sing is “CROAK, CROAK, CROAK.”

But men, women, and children still love listening to the Lyrebird, the patient teacher of the Little Green Frog. That is the reason why frogs croak and the Lyrebird sings.
IN THE DAYS LONG AGO, the ancestors were deciding what totem creature they would look after. At that time, all the creatures on the Earth were fighting among themselves to decide who was the most important creature of all.

For example, the animals held a meeting and said that they were, surely, the most important creatures of all. They were the ones who had fur and could run across the land. These animals all agreed that they should create an exclusive group that only special animals could join.

Then someone piped up and said, “What about the platypus! We know he is a little different from the rest of us, but he does have fur, and, he runs across the land. The platypus should be asked to join the animals’ special group!”

Everyone agreed and they all went over to where the platypus lived and asked if he would join the animals’ special group.

The platypus, who is a very shy creature, listened to what the animals had to say. Then he said, “Thank you very much for asking me to join your special group. I will think about it. In a few days, I will let you know what I have decided.”

The animals all agreed with this promise, and they all went home.

Meanwhile, all the birds held a meeting. They were saying that birds were the most important creatures on the face of the Earth because they are the only ones that can fly. Therefore, birds should have a very special group that only the birds can join.

Then someone piped up and said, “What about the platypus! We all know he is a little different from the rest of us, but he does have a bill and his wife lays eggs. The platypus should be allowed to join the birds’ special group.” All the birds agreed.
They went straight over to where the platypus lived and asked if he would like to join their special group.

The platypus listened to what the birds had to say. Then he said, “Thank you very much, for asking me to join your special birds’ group. Let me think about it for a few days and I will let you know what I have decided.”

All the birds agreed to this, and all went home.

Meanwhile, on the very same day, right next door to where the platypus lived, all the water creatures were having a meeting, saying that they were the most important creatures on the face of the Earth. After all, there is more water than there is land, isn’t there?

And the water creatures decided that they should have their own special group that only water creatures could join.

Having all agreed, someone then piped up and said, “What about the platypus? We all know he is a little different from the rest of us, but his home is right on the water’s edge and he swims and explores the underwater world. The platypus should be part of the water creatures’ special group!”

And all the water creatures agreed, so they went next door to where the platypus lived and asked him if he would join their special group.

Being a very shy creature, the platypus was so surprised at a third group coming to him on the same day that he fainted dead away. When he came to, he listened to what the water creatures had to say.

Then he said, “Thank you very much for asking me to join your special water creatures’ group, but let me think about it, and in a few days’ time I will let you know what I have decided.”

The water creatures agreed, and they all went home.

Meanwhile, the platypus had a real problem. Whose group should he join? The animals’ group, the birds’, or the water creatures’? He went to his family and asked them whose group should he join.

Mother Platypus said, “I would join the birds, if I were you, because we have bills and I am the one who lays the eggs!”

“No, Dad!” said his daughter, “I would join the animals, if I were you. After all, we have beautiful fur.”

But the young boy said, “No, Dad! Join the water creatures. After all, we love to swim and explore the underwater world. You should join the water creatures.”

“Thats no good!” said the platypus, “I cannot join all three groups. I can only join one!”

“Well!” said Mother Platypus, “Why don’t you go for a walk and think about it? Once you have decided, then come back and tell us.”

The platypus went for a walk and thought about it. He came across the other strange creature, the one with the spikes. Yes, you know . . . the echidna!

“Well, Cousin Echidna, whose group do you think I should join?” asked the platypus.

“I wouldn’t join any group, if I were you.” answered the echidna, “You’ll get in trouble with one or the other, so don’t join any at all.”
“That’s no good!” said the platypus, “I’ve got to join someone’s group!”
“Well, go off by yourself and think about it, and once you have decided, you come back and tell me,” said the echidna.

The platypus thought about whose group he would join and the days went by. One morning he called a meeting of all the animals, all the birds, and all the water creatures.

Soon all the creatures gathered around the platypus’s home, fighting among themselves and saying whose group they thought he should join.

Some were saying the platypus should join the animals; others said, “No he will join the birds!” and others were positive that he was going to join the water creatures.

They were all fighting loudly, when the platypus came out of his home, climbed up on a log, cleared his voice, and said, “Thank you all for coming here today. I have decided . . . not to join any group, whatsoever!”
“What!” cried the animals, birds, and water creatures.
“That’s not fair!”
“You have to join someone’s group!”
“Please! Please! Listen to me!” said the platypus. “I don’t have to join anyone’s group to be special because I am special, in my own way.

“Because I have fur and love to run across the land, I have a little bit of animal in me. I also have a little bit of bird in me because of my bill and the fact that my wife lays eggs. As well, I also have a bit of water creature in me because I love to swim and explore the underwater world. So I don’t have to join any one group to be special.

“I don’t know why the ancestors have made us all different, but we must learn to accept all these differences and live with each other.” Having nothing else to say, the platypus stepped down from his log.

All the animals and birds and water creatures thought for a while about what the platypus had said, and they agreed with him. “Yes, we are all special in our own special ways.”

And all the creatures thought the platypus to be very wise indeed.

People were among the group that day and heard what the platypus had to say. They also agreed with him. And, you see, our people have never hunted the platypus because he is so special. He reminds us that we too are special in our own special ways.

So that is the reason the platypus is such a special creature.
Tidalick
A Story from the Murray River Region of New South Wales

Retold with permission by Pauline E. McLeod

Greedy Tidalick drinks all the water throughout the land, causing a great drought, which the creatures of Australia try to reverse.

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG, Tidalick, the little frog, became very thirsty. He began to drink all the water in his waterhole. But his thirst was not quenched and he soon found more water in a nearby river and drank and drank and drank.

Tidalick soon drank all the water that was in the river, and he grew and grew and grew, larger and larger, as he continued to drink all the water throughout the land.

He drank the streams and then the rivers, the billabongs, lagoons, waterholes, and all the waterways. It was not long before all the water was in Tidalick’s enormous stomach and the land became parched and dry.

A great drought spread throughout the land. All the creatures, both of the land and of the water, suffered a terrible thirst. Trees withered, the land dried and cracked, and all the creatures suffered.

When they found out that the drought was caused by the greed of Tidalick, the giant frog, the creatures held a meeting to decide how to get Tidalick to open his mouth and share some of the water.

It was agreed that a group should go to Tidalick the greedy frog and ask him to share some of the water with others. The Kangaroo, Dingo, Goanna, and Emu went together to see Tidalick. They asked him if he would open his mouth and share the water, as everyone was so very thirsty.

But Tidalick refused. He tightly closed his mouth, and not a drop of water came out.

The creatures held another meeting to discuss how they could get Tidalick to open his mouth so the water could come out. It was decided that if they could make Tidalick laugh, then the water would escape.
So all the different creatures from throughout the land gathered to where Tidalick, the giant frog, sat bloated and full of all the water from throughout the land.

A procession of kangaroos jumped in line, one after the other, followed by incredible leaps and bounds that had all the animals opening their mouths in amazement and wonder. They played leap the frog, and all the creatures laughed.

Not Tidalick! He just sat there. Not a smile, not a grin, and not one drop of water left his mouth.

The next creatures to try were the tall emus, with their long legs and long necks. When they danced in formation in front of Tidalick, their dance routines had all the animals opening their mouths in amazement and wonder. One emu got all tangled up and tripped over his legs, and all the creatures laughed.

But not Tidalick! He just sat there. Not a smile, not a grin, and not one drop of water left his mouth.

Next came the wobbly wombats. With their short legs and fat, round bodies, they wobbled, one after the other, from side to side, in a long line, quick wobbles and slow wobbles, that had all the animals opening their mouths in amazement and wonder. Then one wombat wobbled the wrong way, and all the creatures laughed.

But not Tidalick! He just sat there. Not a smile, not a grin, and not one drop of water left his mouth.

The next creature to try was the kookaburra. He knew so many great jokes that even he laughed out loud.

But not Tidalick! He just sat there. Not a smile, not a grin, and not one drop of water left his mouth.
In the audience was an eel, who had lost his watery home to Tidalick, the greedy frog. The eel became so upset and angry that Tidalick would not share the water and give back his home that he slithered in front of Tidalick and began to tell him off. So upset was the eel that he became all twisted and knotted up. He looked so funny!

Suddenly, Tidalick grinned.

He smiled a big smile. Then he started to titter. You see, Tidalick had never seen an eel so angry and twisted and all knotted up before. It looked so funny he began to laugh.

His laughter quickly became a big belly laugh and, before long, the water began gushing out of Tidalick’s mouth, filling the streams, rivers, billabongs, lagoons, waterholes, and all the waterways across the land.

Eel was so happy that his home was back that he unknotted himself and quickly slithered right back into his watery habitat.

Tidalick became smaller and smaller, as gallons of water poured out of him, until finally he became the size that frogs are today.

The animals decided that Tidalick would never again be allowed to cause another great drought through his greed as he did in the First Time, when the world was young.
A LONG TIME AGO, Wayambah the Warrior, from the Ngemba tribe, was returning from hunting when he saw a beautiful young woman from a neighbouring tribe picking waterlilies from the lagoon. She was named Bilbil, because she was born near the swamp, where the Bilbil Boxtrees all grew.

Wayambah crept quietly up behind her and grabbed her. Bilbil was so afraid. "I won’t hurt you," Wayambah told her. I just want to take you back to my tribe for my wife and look after you.”

When Wayambah’s tribe saw him bringing home a woman from the neighbouring tribe, they asked him if her tribe gave her to him.

“No. I have stolen her,” he replied.

The elders were very angry, and one said to him, “You have been very foolish! We had a wife picked out for you. We don’t want to fight with her people.”

“What you have done will start a tribal fight,” said another. “We must punish you before her tribesmen come.”

So they began to throw their boondis and nulla nullas at him. The clubs were thrown at him straight and fast.

Wayambah had two big coolamons, which he used as shields to protect himself from the clubs. He held one on his front and one on his back to protect his body. He began to back away from everyone, but he didn’t realise he was so close to the water’s edge. Holding tight to both the shields, he stepped back . . . into the water.

The angry tribe arrived just as Wayambah disappeared under the water. Everyone waited to see him come up, but even though they waited a long time, he was never seen again.

Time passed. One day, while the Ngemba men were fishing at the nearby stone fish traps, they saw something they’d never seen before. Caught along with the fish in the stone traps was a creature that had a shell on its back and carried a shell in front of its body.
The people stared in amazement. “That is Wayambah,” they said. “He never returned to the land again.”
Wayambah still lives in the water and carries the two shields today. That is how the turtle came to be, back when the world was young.
Brolga was a young girl who loved to dance. She lived in a time when women and girls were not allowed to dance but had to sit down and keep the beat while the men danced.

One day, Brolga could not help herself. She jumped up and joined the men in the dance. At first her people were horrified that a young girl dared to dance. When they saw how well Brolga could dance, they all said she should be allowed to dance.

Before long her fame spread throughout the land, and people came from everywhere to watch Brolga dance. All the men fell in love with Brolga and they all wanted to marry her.

But Brolga refused, saying, “No! I want to dance!” She said, “If I married, I would be too busy looking after the children, cooking, cleaning, and finding food. All I want to do is dance.”

The men thought about it and agreed that Brolga should continue to dance, so they left her alone.

All, that is, except for one man—an evil man. He wanted Brolga all to himself. He followed her everywhere.

Brolga’s people saw this and said, “Brolga, stay around the camp. There we can look after you and you will be safe from the evil man.”

Brolga agreed, and for a long time she danced only around the camp. But one day, Brolga danced and danced and danced. She soon found herself across the plains, far away from her camp and her people.

Brolga thought she was safe. But she was not. The evil man had followed her. He’d tracked her across the plains and he used his magic to make a whirly wind. Then he jumped into the middle of it.

Whirling around and around, he chased after Brolga. He picked her up and screamed, “Marry me, Brolga! Marry me, NOW!”

“No!” answered Brolga, “I will never marry you!”

“If you don’t marry me,” said the evil man, “then you will never marry anyone!”
Angrily, he used his magic to change Brolga. Then he disappeared with the whirlie wind.

When Brolga stood up, all sore and bruised, she looked down at her feet. She no longer had the feet of a young girl. In their place were the feet of a bird.

When she looked at her hands, she no longer had the hands of a young girl, but the wings of a bird. She looked at her body. When she saw she had changed into a BIRD, she screamed!

Brolga was sad. She thought she would never be able to dance again, but when she tested out her new body, she realized that she could still dance.

Meanwhile, her people were searching the plains for her, calling out, “Brolga! Brolga! Where are you, Brolga?”

All of a sudden, a strange bird came toward them and started to dance. At first they did not recognize her and pushed her aside, calling out, “Brolga! Brolga! Where are you Brolga?”

The strange bird kept on dancing. It was dancing one of her people’s special dances. When they saw the dance, they recognized Brolga and realized what the evil man had done to her.

Her people said, “Brolga, come back to the camp with us, where we can look after you and keep you safe.”

Brolga agreed and returned with them.

To this day, Brolgas are still being cared for by the descendants of Brolga’s people. That is how Brolga became the dancing bird she is today.
A LONG TIME AGO, a family of Aboriginal people lived right near a big, deep rainforest. In this family were a mother, a father, a little boy, and his older sister. The father was renowned in the tribe as a great warrior and hunter who possessed a magic boomerang.

They all lived happily for a long time, but the warrior always warned the children of danger, saying, “Whatever you do, don’t go into the forest. Inside the forest there’s a big, deep waterhole. In the depths of that waterhole lives an evil creature, called a Bunyip. He’s such a very fierce Bunyip that it would prove very dangerous to you children if you ever strayed into the forest.”

So the children played happily around the edge of the rainforest, within sight of their mother and father. One day, while they were playing, they saw a baby possum on the edge of the forest. Forgetting their father’s warning, they chased it through the trees.

Together they ran and skipped through the forest, following the trail of the baby possum who knew he was being chased. All of a sudden, the baby possum climbed up the side of a tree and disappeared into a hollow branch, which is where possums live.

When they could find no further sign of the possum, the two children looked around, trying to retrace their footsteps. But it was growing dark and they couldn’t recognize the pattern of their footsteps on the forest floor. Gradually, as it got darker, they began to realise that they were horribly lost.

The little girl, who was the elder child, said, “Come, brother, I’m older than you. I think I know how to find our way home.”

Taking her brother by the hand, she led him along a track, which she thought would lead them out of the forest. Instead, she was mistaken, as the track took them much deeper into the forest. As they rounded a bend, they came across the huge waterhole, the one their father had warned them about.

Realising what they’d done, the little girl placed her finger to her lips and whispered, “Sshh! Don’t make a sound.”
As they quickly turned to leave, the little boy stumbled over a stick, which had fallen from a tree. Snap went the stick as it broke. Snap! Snap! Snap! Snap! The noise echoed throughout the silence of the forest.

At that sound, the murky waters of the waterhole stirred. Suddenly, with a huge lunge, a gigantic head arose out of the water, followed by the shoulders of the great Bunyip. Angry at being awakened, the Bunyip looked around, blinking his large eyes. He saw the two defenseless children.

Rearing up high above them, he roared, “What are you doing in my forest?”

Shaking with fear, the little girl said, “We just came to play. Somehow we managed to get lost.”

The Bunyip roared, “I don’t care. I’m going to catch you children!” He lumbered out of the waterhole and began to chase them.

Just then there was a flash of white beard and black skin. Their father, who had tracked the children, jumped from behind a tree. He took from his waistband a magic boomerang and he threw it so hard, it hit the Bunyip with a forceful wallop. This frightened the Bunyip.

With a mighty roar of pain, it turned and quickly scrambled back into the waterhole, disappearing deep beneath the surface of the water, never to be seen again.

The father picked up his frightened children. “What did I tell you, eh? Never go into the forest! Now you know why.”

Shaking with fear, the children promised never to go near the forest again.

When they arrived home, they found that their mother had prepared a lovely meal of hot kangaroo tail soup and wichetty grubs. Once they’d eaten, the children were soon tucked up in their bed, where their father and mother told them stories, like Aboriginal people do, and in minutes they were fast asleep.
A LONG TIME AGO, back in the Dreaming, old Koala mother didn’t carry the little fella on her back. She just kept him by her side while she was feeding and had a sleep during the day. She always warned the little koala to stay away from the billabong. Koalas didn’t need to go there, as they didn’t need to drink water.

Mother Koala said, “Don’t you go down there, because if you do, the big, ugly Bunyip lives in that big billabong. He will grab you, if you go down there. He’s a fierce fella, that Bunyip.”

And so the little koala listened to what his mother said. But because he was only a baby, he didn’t take much notice. Little fellas don’t always heed what their parents say.

One day when his mother was asleep, he climbed down from the gum tree, wandered along the path, and found his way to the billabong.

He saw all the busy dragonflies, darting hither and yon across the billabong. The croaking of the frogs fascinated him, and he sat quietly, watching them sitting on the lily pads.

Suddenly, the water began to stir! With a great heave, the big ugly Bunyip rose up out of the billabong.

As the little koala was still very young and had not yet learned fear, he was fascinated by the huge Bunyip. He spoke to the Bunyip. “Hello, I’m a koala. Who are you?”

“I’m a Bunyip. This billabong is my home,” he replied. The Bunyip was quite puzzled that, unlike the other animals, this very small creature didn’t seem to be bothered by him.

Because the little koala was the only creature the Bunyip had ever seen who wasn’t frightened of him, he became friendly with the little fella. Besides, he felt a bit lonely, being the only Bunyip in the billabong.

After that first meeting, the little koala would often sneak down to the billabong and have a chat with the Bunyip. One day he invited the Bunyip back into
the forest where he lived. Now, the Bunyip didn’t get out of the billabong much, but he went along the path with the little koala. He took the Bunyip to the tree, which was his home, to meet his family.

When they reached the tree, all the other koalas became very frightened and angry. His mother quickly grabbed the little koala. She raced with him to the top of the gum tree. The others creatures were so scared, they all shouted at the Bunyip to go away.

Unable to understand what was happening, the poor, sad, old Bunyip made his way back to the billabong.

From then on, there was big trouble among the koalas. All the other koalas constantly complained about the little koala. They told his mother that she was irresponsible for sleeping during the day and not carefully watching him. She was reminded that her baby was her responsibility. The constant harassment by the others became unbearable for her.

This situation continued for some time, until Biamee, the Great Spirit, stepped in. “Look,” he said, “this incident has caused much upset and unhappiness.”

Turning to Mother Koala, he said, “Since you can’t be responsible for your young offspring, I command you from now on to carry him on your back!”

Hearing this command, the baby koala climbed up on to his mother’s back, and that’s where he’s remained ever since.

Today, when you see a baby koala clinging to his mother’s back, think of what happened way back in the Dreaming.
The phenomenon of the Min Min lights has been seen by the Aborigines on the Nineteen-Mile Plain for hundreds of years. When the first European settlers came to this part of the country, they also saw the Min Min light when they were returning at night to their homesteads, after riding horses all day with the Aboriginal stockmen.

The light would suddenly appear, their horses would rear in fright, and their dogs would howl with fear. The men would experience the same eerie feeling as the animals. The boss man would call out, “What is that?”

The Aboriginal stockmen knew and always answered, “It’s the Min Min ghost light.”

It was frequently reported by the early settlers that a child had disappeared in the night, believed to have followed the Min Min light, and was never found again.

The fathers, along with Aboriginal trackers, would follow the footprints, which always led on to the treeless plain, where their tracks would be lost forever, covered in the fine dust that blows across the plains.

For many years people have reported seeing the Min Min lights. When travelling by car on the Nineteen-Mile Plain from Brewarrina to Goodooga in Northwestern New South Wales, the Min Min light can still be seen on cold, dark nights.

You can drive for miles on this lonely road, and suddenly you will see what you think may be a car’s headlights coming directly toward you. As you get closer and closer to it, just when you think you are about to pass a car, the lights are gone, disappearing across a treeless plain; leaving an eerie feeling in the car.

A few miles farther on, the light will reappear and follow your car again. Sometimes it will bounce across the road like a bright ball of light and disappear again for a few more minutes; then return, coming at you like headlights again. It’s most frightening.
A LONG TIME AGO, in the Dreamtime, there were no stars in the sky. Everyone in the tribe would sit around the fire all night. The children would look up with wonder into the dreadful blackness overhead.

Mothers always warned their children never to run around after darkness fell, because all sorts of cruel and ugly monsters were hiding behind bushes and stones. They were waiting to grab any little Wharoos who would wander beyond the light of the campfire. The most feared creature was the little Euree woman, who was lurking about, waiting to coax careless children away.

One little boy, whose name was Dhundi, used to lie awake at night and wonder why the sky was so black. Dhundi thought that the Euree woman only wanted naughty Wharoos, so he was always good.

One day, one of the elders of the tribe sent all the boys into the bush, with orders to stay for two days and one night. They were not to eat or drink anything at all until they returned to their goondis.

During the night, when the boys settled down, they snuggled close to each other for warmth and fell asleep. A dreadful storm woke them up. Thunder and lightning flashed all around. The boys were all very frightened.

“It’s Wandah,” they whispered, huddling closer than ever. As the noise became louder and louder, they shivered and clung together. No one dared look up.

But unlike the others, one boy, Dhundi, wasn’t frightened. He got up. Looking out into the darkness, Dhundi walked into the open space where all the noise was coming from. He stood calling out, “I am Dhundi. I am not afraid.”

Suddenly, a big round ball of fire came down from the sky. Three times, Dhundi called out, “I am not afraid! I am not afraid! I am not afraid!”

At that, the fireball opened. Inside there was a bright, glowing, red man standing in front of him.
The red man said to Dhundi, “I am your brother. When I was your age, I was coaxed away. And now, because you are very brave, I will show you how to put the stars in the sky and to light up the night.”

Dhundi, the brave boy, was never seen again.

That night, the Wirrigans danced with flaming torch sticks. The three strongest warriors lit one end of their big boomerangs and threw them far up into the black sky. Everyone looked on in awe as the boomerangs circled around and around, lighting up the dark sky, leaving behind a trail of sparks falling in all directions.

Everyone was so happy to see the sparkling stars light up the black sky. They all watched, breathless, as the lighted boomerangs circled upward, hurtling far out into the night sky.

The elders looked up and said, “The lighted boomerangs are still going around and around in big circles! That is why the stars never stop in one place.”

Everyone was very sad that Dhundi, the boy who was so brave, had gone to look for his brother, who must have been living in the big bright ball of light for many years.

On a cold, dark night across the plains in this country, strange lights are often seen.

The tribal elders from the Ngemba and Murrawarri tribes, whose country borders this Nineteen-Mile Plain, used to say, “That’s Min Min—the Ghost Light, which is only coming out at night, to cast an eerie light over the plains. It is Dhundi and his brother, who live in the ball of fire.”
Aboriginal people regard the Willy Wagtail as the most intelligent of all living creatures and treat it with respect. They believe the bird listens to their conversations. If they speak ill of a departed spirit, the bird will go and tell the spirit, who will return to haunt the offenders.

A LONG TIME AGO, high in the mountains in Western Australia, there lived two giant animals. They were a giant snake and a giant, wild dingo, which used to hunt down and eat people. These fearsome animals lived in big caves alongside each other and would leave their hiding places only when the sun disappeared and darkness fell upon the land.

As the animals were afraid of fire, the Aboriginal people kept their campfires burning all night to keep these fearsome creatures away. Despite these precautions, men, women, and children were still taken and eaten by the two giants.

One day the people held a meeting to decide how they could rid themselves of this menace. Among the tribe there were two brave young warriors who offered their assistance. One was called Djididjidi (pronounced jidajida), the Willy Wagtail man, and the other was Kuburi, the Robin Redbreast man.

One dark night, when the two creatures left their caves to go hunting, the two brave young men found and placed a pile of firewood in the mouth of each creature’s cave. Following this, each one climbed a nearby tree and waited. Sure enough, just before dawn, both dingo and snake returned to their caves and disappeared inside.

Quickly, each young man climbed down from the tree in which he’d hidden. Working together as quietly as they could, they pushed the dry wood across the front of each cave to block off the entrance. Then, rubbing their firesticks together very quietly so they did not awaken the creatures inside, they set fire to the tinder-dry wood. Great clouds of smoke and fierce flames spread across the entrance to the caves, trapping the giant animals inside.
It wasn’t long before a great howling was heard in the cave of the dingo. Soon after, the giant, wild dog came stumbling through the flames, blinded now by smoke. As he stumbled out, little Djidijdjidi swung his nulla nulla with such force that he found his mark, crushing the dingo’s skull. Instantly, the dog fell dead at his feet.

At the entrance to the other cave, brave Kuburi faced the giant python as it, too, came slithering through the barrier of fire, its body burning from the hot embers and sparks that clung to it. The little warrior quickly threw his spear, which found its mark. With an enormous shudder that made the earth shake, the great snake also died.

Both young men became heroes of their people, who marked their success with a great celebration because they had been saved from the threat of these terrible creatures.

When both the heroes eventually passed on, their spirits emerged in the form of two birds. Kuburi became the Robin Redbreast and Djidijdjidi became the Willy Wagtail. Today in Western Australia both these little birds are protected because they were heroes of their people . . . back in the Dreaming.
Biamee, the Great Spirit, creates the world with all its plants, waterways, and breezes. While visiting the mountains, Marmoo, the evil one, plans to destroy it all by producing a plague of insects. Mother Nature comes to the rescue.

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG, Biamee, the Creator Spirit, came down to Earth. There was nothing here then, and Biamee decided to make it a beautiful place to live. So he made some areas mountainous and other places flat, as far as you could see. Other areas he made full of sand. Finally, he created the seashores.

When he finished, Biamee added different kinds of plants that could live in all these different areas. In the sandy deserts, he made shrubs and flowers to live where it was hot and dry. Next he made grasses and flowers to live on the flat plains. He then made ferns and trees, which would survive in the mountains, and, finally, he made grasses and shrubs that could live only by the sea.

When he had finished making all of these, Biamee decided to add some water that would help the plants survive in their special places, like waterholes in the deserts and rivers along the plains, waterfalls in the mountains, the great waves of the deep ocean, and gentle seas by the shores. When he finished all of this, Biamee added a soothing breeze to caress the plants he had made.

Biamee was very pleased with what he had created and decided to stay on the Earth for a while. So high up in the mountains he stayed on, with Mother Nature.

Meanwhile, Marmoo, the evil one, watched everything Biamee created. When Biamee finished, Marmoo went to his wife and complained about Biamee.

“Biamee thinks he is so wonderful, because he made the Earth,” complained Marmoo. “He thinks he is so great.”

“Oh, stop complaining! Make your own earth, if you think you can,” replied Marmoo’s wife.

“I’ll do better than that,” answered Marmoo. “I’ll destroy everything Biamee has made!”
With that, Marmoo darted deep into his cave and started to make these very strange little creatures. Some crawled; others flew; some squirmed; others burrowed. Some had only two legs; others had hundreds.

Marmoo made millions and millions of these strange little creatures and sent them out of his cave to attack Biamee’s beautiful earth. Hordes of little insects left the cave like a plague and attacked the plants that Biamee had created.

High in the mountains, Biamee came out of the cave he was visiting to look over his beautiful earth. From where he was standing he could see a great distance. Suddenly, his eyes noticed something strange. On the distant plains, an ugly little brown patch was growing larger and larger.

Biamee cried out to Mother Nature, “Look! Look over there! Look at what someone has done to my beautiful earth!”

Mother Nature was horrified. “Who would do such a terrible thing?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” answered Biamee. “What can we do to stop this from happening?”

“I know,” said Mother Nature. She went into her cave. There she made a little bird creature, with long, strong legs, a round body, a sharp beak, and tail feathers that looked like a lyre.

Puzzled, Biamee asked, “What is it?”

“It is a bird!” answered Mother Nature. “A Lyrebird.”

“What does it do?” asked Biamee.

“Watch,” answered Mother Nature. She turned and let the Lyrebird out of her cave.

Down it flew, straight toward the plague of insects, and started to gobble them up, one at a time. But realizing that one little Lyrebird cannot stop a whole plague of insects all by itself, Mother Nature called all her Good Spirits to come and help her make more birds.

Some of the Good Spirits were very clever with their hands and made beautiful birds, like the black swan and other water birds. Other Good Spirits were not so good with their hands and could only make small birds, like the finches and tiny fairy wrens. Some were very creative and, using all the colors of the rainbow, made all the colorful parrots.

When they finished, the birds left the cave and flew straight toward the plague of insects. Greedily, they began to devour them. Before long, the insects were under control and were no longer a plague.

Today, the birds are still waiting for a feast like they’ve never enjoyed since the beginning of time. Meanwhile, Marmoo is still scheming up ways to destroy Biamee’s beautiful earth. That is how the birds and insects exist today, because of Marmoo, the Jealous One, way back at the beginning of time.
Belah, the Sun Woman
A Story from the Flinders Ranges of South Australia

Retold with permission by Francis Firebrace

AT THE BEGINNING OF TIME, Belah, the warrior Sun Woman, whose campfire was the only light on Earth at that time, liked the taste of Aboriginal flesh. She would kill, roast, and eat anyone she caught. So all the people lived in fear of the Sun Woman.

At this time, travelling through the country was a brave warrior called Kudna, the Lizard Man, who possessed five boomerangs. He’d performed many incredible feats with them.

So it was that Lizard Man came upon the camp of his friends, the Euro people, only to find that every single one had been dragged off, killed, and eaten by the Sun Woman. In a fit of rage, Lizard Man swore, “I will kill Belah, the evil Sun Woman!”

The Lizard Man quietly approached her campfire. But Belah saw him coming. She snarled her hate in his direction and hurled fireballs at him, making him shelter behind rocks and trees. Closer and closer he came.

Sensing the danger, the Sun Woman turned and reached for her spear. The first boomerang left the brown-skinned warrior’s hands, whirring round in a savage arc, striking the Sun Woman with such force that she fell backward into her fire, turning the whole thing into a giant fireball, which rolled off the edge of the Earth.

Immediately the whole place was plunged into darkness.

Kudna stood there in the darkness and silence. He’d saved his people from the Sun Woman, but at what cost? Now there was no light, only darkness. He stood there, horrified at what he’d done, not knowing how to bring the light back again.

Then Kudna, the Lizard Man, remembered. He still had four boomerangs left in his possum-skin belt. So he turned to the north, took a boomerang from his belt, and he threw it.

Whrrrrrrrr . . . and he waited. Nothing happened. The darkness remained. He turned to the south and threw another boomerang.

Whrrrrrrrr . . . and he waited, but again, nothing happened.
Kudna turned and faced the west and threw a boomerang.

Whrrrrrrrr . . . but, once again, nothing happened. There was not even a glimmer of light.

Finally, he slowly turned in an easterly direction, took the last remaining boomerang from his possum-skin belt, raised the weapon far back past his head, and, with all the strength he could muster, he threw it.

As it left his hand in a blur of yellow ochre and wood, it made a sound that only a boomerang makes when thrown by an Aboriginal warrior

Whrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . . It disappeared to the east, into the darkness over the edge of the Earth.

In darkness and a really deep silence, the warrior waited . . . and waited . . . until, finally, an amazing thing began to happen.

For the first time ever, a light began to appear on the eastern rim of the Earth, and Kudna was able to see the silhouettes of the mountains and the trees. Suddenly, a great ball of fire rose high into the air and traveled, ever so slowly, across the sky and disappeared into the western sky, thus creating day and night.

Day, to hunt and to gather food. Night, to sit around the campfire, to dance and sing, to listen to stories, and, finally, to rest.

Kudna became the hero of his people for saving them from Belah, the Sun Woman, and for creating day and night . . . way back at the beginning of time.

To this day, the Aboriginal people of the Flinders Ranges will not kill a goanna or gecko because they believe the Lizard Man saved them from the warrior woman, Belah, and a life of darkness when he created day and night.

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Belah, the Sun Woman
A LONG TIME AGO, back when the world was young, there were two young people who were very much in love. The young man, Borola, who was tall and handsome, was from a different tribe than the girl, Purlimil, but they loved one another, regardless.

Sadly, the beautiful young girl, Purlimil, was promised to Trlta, a much older man of her tribe. He was a Wirrigan or clever old fella, who possessed much magic.

The love between the young couple was so strong. By meeting secretly at night, the couple could be together and so their love grew. But they lived in constant fear of discovery and knew they would have to leave and go somewhere far away.

One night, under the cover of darkness, Borola came to collect Purlimil. Treading quietly so they did not disturb the people who were sleeping, they crept away from the camp.

Travelling hard throughout the night, the young couple managed to put a great distance between themselves and Purlimil’s tribe. Days passed, and eventually they arrived, exhausted, at his people’s campsite beside the lake and there they stayed.

Because they knew they would be in great danger if the old man decided to seek revenge, the young couple and his tribe took special precautions in case of an attack. Some years passed, and when they hadn’t heard from old Trlta, the people forgot.

The young wife, Purlimil, stopped worrying, and the couple was able to relax and enjoy a good life with her husband’s people.

But Trlta, the old Wirrigan man, never forgot Purlimil, his promised bride. Secretly he plotted his revenge.

There came a time one day when the old man decided to set off across the desert and headed toward the lake in search of the young couple, taking several armed warriors from his tribe with him.
After travelling for a long time, they came at last upon the campsite of Borola's people. It was late at night. Although the fires were still burning, the people were all fast asleep.

With no resistance against attack offered by the slumbering tribe, the invading men quietly took up their spears and moved forward.

Creeping silently through the darkness, they speared and killed every man, woman, and child, including the young couple, Borola and Purlimil. The blood of those slaughtered ran across the plains and stained the desert sands red.

Above them, the Sky Spirits wept salt tears at the wanton destruction of these innocent people.

Curious to revisit the site of the massacre, the old Wirrigan and his men returned the following year to the scene of his crime. To their surprise, they found that the lake was full of salt, made from the dried out tears of the Sky Spirits.

At this discovery, the men accompanying Trlta fled in fear, leaving behind the old Wirrigan, who just wanted to stay and gloat over the bodies and bones.

But instead of finding bones at the site of the massacre, the old man was surprised to find that the ground surrounding the area, where the blood of innocent people had stained the land, was now covered by masses of beautiful, red flowers with black eyes.

As he stood there, gaping in amazement, the heavens suddenly opened wide. Like a bolt of lightning, a spear sped down and struck the old Wirrigan man to the ground. And as he lay dying, the voice of the Sky Spirits called out to him from above.

“Trlta, old Wirrigan, you are now being punished for the great wrong you have done at this place, where you murdered so many innocent people.”

When the old Wirrigan man died, his body was transformed into a large rock. After some time, the rock shattered into millions of pieces of tiny lifeless pebbles and there they lie, scattered on the ground around Lake Eyre, to this day.

Now, when you see the beautiful red flower, the Sturt Desert Pea, known to the Aborigines as Flowers of Blood, be reminded of the tragic love story of these two young people, which happened a long time ago, when the world was young.
IN THE BEGINNING, the only person who possessed fire was the Firekeeper, who had a magic stick, which he would use to make fires.

This Firekeeper would show people how to cook meat and other foods, how to use fire for warmth and to light up the darkness of night, and to keep away predatory animals and evil spirits.

There came a time when the Firekeeper was travelling along the coast. As he walked along the way, he met the Fishman, who joined him in his travels.

The Fishman became very interested in the magic stick, which made fire, and so the two men became friendly and made camp together. In due course, the fire was lit and, with the smell of food cooking, the Fishman asked the Firekeeper if he could have the firestick.

But the Firekeeper exclaimed, “No! It’s not possible! In the underwater world, fire and water cannot mix. Water will quickly kill the fire in this magic stick.”

When he heard this, the Fishman didn’t believe the Firekeeper’s story. He thought the Firekeeper was being selfish and just wanted to keep it for himself. For hours he plotted and planned to steal the magic stick.

In the middle of the night, when all was still and he was sure the Firekeeper was in a deep sleep, the Fishman crept forward. He snatched the magic firestick from the sand in which it stood and headed off over the sand dunes toward his home, deep in the sea.

The Firekeeper stirred and awakened. He sensed that something was very wrong. Looking around, he found that the firestick was gone. The Fishman was also missing.

Quickly, the Firekeeper followed the Fishman’s tracks. In the darkness, he could easily see where the glow of the magic stick was, held fast by the Fishman, who by now was wading out into the water.

The Firekeeper rushed from behind the Fishman, grabbing at the firestick. Fighting hard for possession of the firestick, they tugged each other backward and forward, left and right. Finally, the Firekeeper, who was a very strong but
peaceful man, managed to pull the firestick from the Fishman, who turned and angrily dived beneath the waves and disappeared.

During the struggle for possession of the firestick, some seawater soaked the magic firestick. It was now hissing steam. Realizing that the firestick was dying, the Firekeeper ran as fast as he could, up the beach and into the bush.

He stopped briefly to rub the magic of the firestick into special trees, and so it was that the firestick went out but its magic remains.

By selecting dry sticks from these particular trees and rubbing them together, fire reappears. So the magic of fire remains with the people to this day.
The First Waratah

A Love Story from the Illawarra Region of the South Coast of New South Wales

Retold with permission by Pauline E. McLeod

The Waratah is also known as the native rose, and there are many different versions of this story.

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG, in a valley among the mountains, there lived a beautiful young maiden, called Krubi. Every day she wrapped a bright red kangaroo cloak around herself and left the village for a place in the mountains. There she would watch for the return of the hunting party and Bahmai, her betrothed.

Bahmai was a very handsome young warrior, to whom she had been betrothed since birth. Whenever he left the camp to go hunting with the other men, she would take her red cloak and go up to her favorite place, high up in the mountains, which overlooked the entrance to her people’s camp. There she would sit for hours, until they returned.

When Bahmai was taken away by the older men to go through his initiation—the time when a boy became a man—Krubi again waited for him, in her favorite spot on the mountain. Anyone entering the valley could see her bright red cloak, high up on the mountainside. Bahmai could see her waiting for him from a great distance away.

One day a dispute occurred with a neighboring tribe. They had broken the protocol by hunting without permission in her people’s territory. Angered by this deliberate invasion of their land, a party of warriors went out to repel the raiders.

Before Bahmai went to join the other men, he came to Krubi and gave her one of his spears to look after, promising that upon his return they would marry.

With her red cloak wrapped warmly around her and holding Bahmai’s spear close to her body, Krubi set off for her favorite place, high up on the mountain, overlooking the entrance to the valley, to watch the warriors leave.
Days went by and no word came about the war. Krubi refused to eat or drink anything while she waited for Bahmai’s return. Even though the other women tried to encourage her by tempting her with morsels of the most delicious food, she steadfastly refused. Many days passed, and still she fretted alone for him. Eventually she became ill from the lack of food and water.

One morning, in the far distance, she began to see a small line of men returning from the war. One by one she searched for Bahmai’s face amongst them. Finally, when she could not find him, she knew that he had been killed and would never return to her. She lay where she was . . . and wept.

Her heart was broken. No matter how hard her people tried to get her to eat some food or drink some water, Krubi refused. Slowly she began to wither away. In such a weakened state, it did not take long for Krubi to die. One day the people found her in the place where she had waited so long for Bahmai’s return.

Some time after Krubi’s death, an amazing thing happened. An incredibly beautiful flower appeared in the place on the mountainside where she died. Its leaves were like sharpened points and the stem of the plant was as high as a long spear.

The beautiful flower was colored deep red, the color of the red kangaroo cloak the young woman had worn. Its form was that of a broken heart, and its petals were the shapes of many teardrops.

The people called the tree Waratah. Every year when it blooms, its flame-red flowers remind them of the love Krubi and Bahmai had for each other, way back when the world was young.
A LONG TIME AGO, the Weilwan tribe had a big camp out near Guddie Springs. The springs had beautiful clear water, but something happened to change the water.

The Weilwan people were living quite happily until they noticed that some members of their tribe were missing. One day the men of the tribe came back from hunting and said they had seen the tracks of Gambil Gambil, a spirit woman, who used to roam from the Ngemba and Murrawarri country.

Gambil Gambil had the power to change into any form; she would even change herself to look like strange Aborigines. It was said that if Gambil Gambil looked at the face of an Aborigine, that person would always be ugly. So the Weilwan people were really worried about Gambil Gambil.

The Weilwans found the tracks of Gambil Gambil. They tracked her to where she had lured away a member of their tribe by promising to show him where he could easily get plenty of a native honey called sugar bag. Judging from the tracks she’d made on the ground, they could see where Gambil Gambil changed into her true form before she carried away her victim.

Sometimes Gambil Gambil would take her victims down into a deep water-hole or into the butt of a big tree. Occasionally, she would take them right away to the sea.

In the Weilwan tribe, there was a very wise old Wirrigan. He knew the elders wanted the land where Gambil Gambil lived. He said to all the women in the tribe, “Cut your hair and make me a really strong cord from the hair.”

When the women made the cord, the old Wirrigan walked slowly out into the bush with the cord and his spear, saying to the elders, “I will chase away Gambil Gambil.”

The old Wirrigan hadn’t gone very far into the bush when he heard a voice saying, “Here old fella, have some sugar bag.”
He knew straight away that it was Gambil Gambil. When the old Wirrigan turned around, he saw a kind-looking Aborigine, holding out to him the biggest sugar bag he had ever seen.

It was very hard for the old Wirrigan to say no because everyone loves sugar bag. But the old Wirrigan from the Weilwan was very wise. He knew that, if he ate any of the sugar bag, he would fall asleep and Gambil Gambil would carry him away, to a big waterhole.

So he said, “No!” refusing the big sugar bag.

Then Gambil Gambil offered him a leg of kangaroo. Again the clever old Wirrigan said, “No!” He knew the meat would also put him to sleep.

Gambil Gambil then said, “Come with me, I will show you a spring of beautiful clear water. Gambil Gambil took the old Wirrigan to the spring that is known as Guddie Spring.

When they reached it, the Wirrigan said, “I am tired. I will lie down in the shade.” Suspecting nothing, Gambil Gambil lay down with him.

As soon as Gambil Gambil wasn’t looking, the old Wirrigan threw his hair cord around Gambil Gambil. He pulled it tight as he jumped onto her back and tied himself on.

Gambil Gambil screamed with rage. Straight away, she changed into her real form. The old Wirrigan hung on. He drove his spear into her, but she could not be killed.

The fight went on. Gambil Gambil could not shake the old man off her back. She dived down into the spring to get rid of the Wirrigan. The fight was so terrible that the beautiful clear spring was turned into ugly soda water.

Finally, when Gambil Gambil could not get rid of the old man, she flew off, far up into the sky, with the Wirrigan still tied to her back. Higher and higher she flew, until she was in the path of the falling stars, which knocked the old Wirrigan off her back. He fell with the stars to where Girilambone is now.

When the Weilwan Tribe saw a falling star that night, they were too frightened to look up. But the people knew they would never be troubled by Gambil Gambil again.

Gambil Gambil is the falling star, still flying across the skies, trying to shake the old Wirrigan off her back.

The Weilwan people also said the biggest star they ever saw fell at Girilambone, and it lit up all the land around. Even the Murrawarri, Barkinji, Weilwan, Ngemba, the Narran tribes, Kamilroi, Wongaibon, and the rest of the Bogan tribes saw it.
After a few moons had passed, the elders of all these tribes knew the big star would be cool, so they all went to have a look at it. But when they arrived, it had disappeared. They said it made a big hole and melted. It ran away underground, to where Cobar is today and even farther out, in a straight line, to Broken Hill.

That’s why copper, silver, and gold are found there today, because of that big, bright star that fell at Girilambone—way back in the Dreamtime.
The word meanings given here are related to the tribal group or storyteller from which the story evolved. There are at least 700 different Aboriginal dialects, many of which have different words to describe these things.

**Aunty**: adult woman, not necessarily closely related

**Baa-lah**: gum tree

**Banda Banda**: grasshopper

**Beetha**: worm

**Billabong**: large waterhole

**Bogong moth**: moth considered to be a great delicacy

**Bolie Boolie**: whirlie whirlie wind

**Boomerang**: flat, curved wooden weapon, which is thrown. Some boomerangs return, but not all.

**Boondis weapons**: Aboriginal sticks used as a club

**Brolga**: large, stilt-legged bird known for its mating dance

**Buleene**: death

**Bullroarer**: powerful, sacred musical instrument forbidden to women

**Bundah**: big gray kangaroo

**Buntha Buntha**: poison or ghost dust

**Bunyip**: large, scary monster that lives in billabongs

**Bura**: thunder

**Caa-mah**: spear

**Carbon dating**: scientific method of establishing the age of objects

**Clapsticks**: two sticks of uneven weight and different woods that are beaten together

**Cockatoo**: large white or black parrot

**Coolamon**: hollowed out wooden or bark dish used by women
Corroboree: Aboriginal celebration with feasting, art, dance, music, and storytelling
Dennewans: young emus
Dhundi: boy’s name that means “frog”
Dhurran: snake
Didgeridoo: instrument made from a long, hollow branch
Dilly bag: carrying bag made of string, used by women
Dingo: native wild dog
Dreaming: all-encompassing description of the Dreamtime Creation period
Dreamtime: historical reference to an event in a specific period of the Creation
Dry river bed: riverbed where the early Aborigines said “the river runs upside down.”
(The water is under the sand.)
Dunniah: wattle tree
Echidna: spiky, ant-eating animal similar to a hedgehog
Elders: wise older members of the tribe
Emu: very large, long-legged, flightless bird
Euree: little hairy woman
Euro: the Aboriginal name for wallaby
Fella: man
Gadi: below, beneath
Gambil Gambil: spirit woman
Gammon: pretending
Garnee: lizard
Gian: moon
Gilghi: small waterhole
Ginghi: cockatoo
Girilambone: place of falling stars
Goanna: very large lizard
Gondwanaland: great prehistoric southern continent
Googar: large lizard
Goolbree: male emu
Goondi: rough bark shelter
Guddie: soda water springs near Coonamble, now known as Cuddie Springs. Now dried up. Archaeologists are excavating and making incredible discoveries there.
Gumleaf: eucalyptus leaf used as a musical instrument
Guriada: telepathy or long-distance magic
Kata Tjuta: formation of huge round boulders known as Olga
Kookaburra: bird known as laughing jackass
Koolah: small tree-climbing marsupial; Koala in some tribal languages
Koori: Aboriginal people of the southeast coast of Australia
Marnghi: wattle tree
Marsupials: mammals that carry their young in an external pouch
Marthaguy River: one of the small rivers near the reedbeds
Megafauna: giant creatures of the Pleistocene period
Men’s business: sacred male initiation rites
Message stick: small piece of wood incised with marks, carried by travelers to show they had good reason to be somewhere. Sometimes they told of good hunting sites.
Mirrabooka: the Southern Cross constellation
Mission: government reservations run by churches
Mood diah: possum
Malyan: eagle hawk
Mungaleah: turtle
Murrawah: red kangaroo
Narrbang: dilly bag made of string, used by women
Nardoo stone: stone on which seeds were ground to make flour
Ngemba: Aboriginal tribe
Nguree: emu
Nulla Nullas: heavy Aboriginal clubs used as weapons
Old fulla: nasty old man
Payback: system of punishment for crime enforced by victim’s family
Pikkuw: crocodile
Pullah Pullah: butterfly
Quongdong: native fruit like a plum
Reedbeds: the Macquarie Marshes
Rina dina: raindrops
Sahul: Ice Age continent: Australia, Tasmania, and New Guinea
Seanachie: Irish storyteller
Sorry business: bad karma
Songlines: couplets giving custodianship to tribal land
Squatters: similar to homesteaders of the American West
Sugar bag: wild honey from native bees
Symbolic art: art made up of dots, lines, zigzags, and whorls that tells a story
Tar monadro: great gum tree
Termites: white ants
Thermo-luminescence: scientific method of establishing age of objects
Thiggibilla: porcupine
Tiridee: native bee
Tongala: Aboriginal name for Murray River
Totem: animal identity, conferred at birth; part of a complex system of Aboriginal tribal identification
Trowena: Aboriginal name for Tasmania
Uluru (Ayers Rock): most sacred site
Une: lightning
Waaway: scary creature; mythical dog creature
Walkabout: journey made for education, gathering food, trade
Wallaby: small kangaroo-type marsupial
Wandjinjas: spirit heroes of the Dreamtime in Kimberley and Northern Territory
Waratah: native rose, floral emblem of New South Wales
Warrumbungles: mountain range where the wallabys live
Wayamba: turtle
Weilwan: Aboriginal tribe
Whan: crow
Wharooos: children
Whirlie whirlie: spiral wind similar to a tornado
Wichetty grubs: grubs or larvae, dug out of the ground and eaten
Widga bread: bread made out of seeds ground on the Nardo stone and cooked in hot ashes
Wirimbelingy: poisonous redback spider
Wirrigan: clever fella; possesses special magic powers
Wit wit: spear
Women’s business: women’s sacred initiation rites
X-ray art: art that shows both internal organs and external forms of creatures
Yam stick: pointed stick carried by women for digging yams
Yellada: gum
Yhi: sun
Yidicki: hollow wooden instrument
Youreil: owl
Bibliography

Although I have read all of the books listed for confirmation of material, most of my information for Gadi Mirrabooka came from consultations with the three Aboriginal storytellers who have been very generous with their time and knowledge—H. McKay.


Helen F. McKay

Founder and Life Member of Australian Storytelling Guild (NSW) Inc., Helen works tirelessly to promote storytelling around Australia. She also keeps in contact, by e-mail, with storytellers around the world, sharing knowledge and ideas. Helen has two daughters, two sons, six granddaughters, and one great-grandson, most of whom live in New Zealand. She loves to share her stories with her grandchildren when visiting New Zealand.

In 1996, with co-author Berice Dudley, she wrote *About Storytelling—A Practical Handbook*, now used as a text in universities and teachers’ colleges. This book has helped many people in Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand master the skills of storytelling (a second edition was published in May 1998). Another children’s book, *Riotous Riddles*, was published in 1998. A book to be titled *More About Storytelling* has been commissioned.

While working in New Zealand as a teacher, Helen inspired gifted underachievers to extraordinary accomplishments, using music and story, which was part of her background. She played the violin for 15 years as a child. Helen is a three-dimensional artist and designer.

Since settling in Australia, Helen has been enthralled by the indigenous stories of Australia and began actively researching their origins. She believes the messages they carry are more relevant to society now than ever before.

The stories she offers to all age groups include folklore, natural and local history, and personal experiences. She uses music, costume, simple bric-a-brac, and other collectibles as creative mind-joggers in her stories. As a speaker, Helen links stories to the messages she delivers in her workshops. She presents workshops on storytelling, speaking, writing, and life skills, including “Meeting Life’s Challenges” and “Happiness and the Art of Living.”
Pauline E. McLeod

Pauline is one of Australia’s leading Aboriginal storytellers. She is a versatile, multitalented artist, experienced in all facets of the media: television, radio, theatre, film, and writing, anything from plays to short stories. After completing her training at the Eora Centre for Performing Arts in Redfern, she has worked as a freelance performer since the early 1990s.

Popularly known as “Pauline from Playschool,” she is one of the first Aboriginal performers to appear regularly on a nationwide television show. Since 1990, Pauline, a delightful animated storyteller, has appeared on Playschool and a number of other Australian television shows with ABCTV and SBSTV.

Pauline is a regular cultural educator/storyteller/performer in the Yirribana Gallery, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, and was poet and storyteller at reconciliation forums throughout Sydney from 1996 through 2000.

An experienced cultural educator, Pauline has been presenting her cultural stories at schools throughout New South Wales since 1990, working with children and youth from preschool age through high school. She has been working as a guest lecturer in Aboriginal studies at TAFE (Technical and Further Education) colleges and universities throughout New South Wales and as storyteller at the Opera House, Australian Museum, and National Gallery in Canberra.
June E. Barker

June, an indigenous storyteller, cultural educator, and tribal elder in Lightning Ridge, a town in Northwestern New South Wales, works in many far-flung areas of outback NSW. She travels around schools and community groups, educating children and others about the history and culture of indigenous Australia. June is a cultural advisor to the people in her area, and her interest is in preserving and passing on the stories containing the life lessons and values embedded in them, before they are lost.

June is a popular storyteller, much in demand for festivals and at educational institutions around Australia. Many of the stories she tells relate closely to the area in which she lives.

Her concern is that the storyteller is missing in our mass media today, and the messages we are receiving via the media are not grounded in simple truths. As a result, society is seeking solutions from sources that cannot provide the answers people need. She believes the answers to many of the questions being asked lie in the truths passed on in the indigenous stories she tells.
Francis Firebrace

Francis Firebrace is a cultural educator, indigenous storyteller, tribal elder, and artist, combining the four elements of the Dreaming: storytelling, dance, art, and music. He presents workshops and storytelling performances to groups of all ages and types, both in Australia and internationally. He is in great demand as a storyteller for festivals overseas.

Now recognised as one of Australia’s best Aboriginal storytellers, Francis has been performing his Dreaming stories at schools, functions, and festivals, in theatre, and on radio and television. Francis has a remarkable presence. Wherever he appears, he leaves a lasting impression.

Born in a small country town on the Murray River, his father was Aboriginal and his mother European. Working as a drover and stockman and travelling all over outback New South Wales and Queensland as a young man, Francis acquired and told many of his Dreaming stories. Later his interest grew, and he studied and learned other indigenous stories, given to him by Aboriginal people scattered throughout this vast land.

His popularity is due to the fact that the stories he tells contain messages about caring for each other and the Earth, and about racism and greed. He aims to bridge the gaps separating people by generating a greater understanding of his cultural heritage and the lessons it offers. He works hard for reconciliation in Australia between the non-native population and the Aboriginal community.

Francis often tells his stories accompanied by a didgeridoo player and dancers, combining three of the important elements of the Dreaming into exciting and entertaining performances. His paintings reflect the visual pictures his stories evoke.
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The following section of colour plates shows some photographs of Francis Firebrace’s original Aboriginal artwork that illustrate the stories he tells. Included also are photographs that show some of the great diversity of unique animal and bird life, as well as spectacular scenery of the Australian landscape. The great sense of survival in Australia is conveyed with the images of trees existing in hostile environments such as the desert areas surrounding Uluru (Ayres Rock), and of trees growing out of rocks in deep gorges. Many of Australia’s animals are nocturnal (koalas, emus, kangaroos), which makes it difficult to photograph a good image during daylight hours.
Mulla Mulla – Eggs of Life associated with the Rainbow Serpent, Northern Territory (also referred to in modern-day as “The Devil’s Marbles”)

Flora along the Arthur River in Tasmania

Along the Great Ocean Road in the Grampians (Gariwerd), Victoria
Meehni, Wimlah, and Gunnedoo, the “Three Sisters” rock formation, Blue Mountains, New South Wales

Uluru (Ayres Rock) – most sacred site in central Australia, Northern Territory
Frog and Lyrebird (Tale no. 19)

Myee – the Bogong Moth (Tale no. 18)

Lumerai – the Mother Snake creation story depiction (Tale no. 3)
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Brolga – the dancing bird (Tale no. 23)

Lizard (Tale no. 5)

Frog (Tale no. 19)
Emu (flightless bird)

Parrots (Crimson Rosellas)

Mother kangaroo with baby (the joey) in her pouch
Springbrook waterfall

Rock formation jutting out into the sea along the Great Southern Ocean Road, Victoria

“The Nut” rock formation in Tasmania