

AUTHOR NOTE

Where do you get your ideas?

This is a question that writers get asked all the time, and more often than not, the answer I give is “everywhere!” Writers, at least in my experience, run short on time, money and energy; never on ideas. This is perhaps especially so for me when I am writing The Tribe series. I feel as though it is a story I discover more than one I create; it is as if the characters take me on their own journeys, which I interpret through the lens of my understandings and experiences. But there has been so much interest in the parts of Ashala’s story which are drawn from

my cultural background that I thought it was worth saying something about the source of those aspects of the novels.

Aboriginal people of Australia have the oldest continuous living culture on earth. We are not a single homogenous group; we are many nations, and we hail from diverse homelands. Some of us are rangeland people; some forest and some desert; some river and some saltwater. We call our homelands our Countries. The Country of my people, the Palyku people, is dry, inland Country – but in case you are thinking of unending sand dunes, that’s not what it looks like. Palyku Country is a place of sharp contrasts and bright colours – red earth, yellow spinifex grass bleached white, purple hills, green gum trees and blue sky.

The world that Ashala occupies is not Australia, of course. There is no Australia, in Ashala’s time, and no anywhere-else-that-exists-now either. The earth has torn itself apart; the tectonic plates have shifted; and a single, entirely new continent is the only piece of land remaining on the planet. But every landscape I describe in *The Tribe* series is inspired by one of the many biodiverse regions of Australia. So there really *are* towering tuarts; they grow in the Country of the Nyoongah people, in the south-west of Western Australia, and are one of the rarest ecosystems on earth.

In Ashala’s world, where people no longer distinguish between themselves on the basis of race, the word “Aboriginal” would have no meaning. But she carries that ancient bloodline, and has the same deep connection to the Firstwood that present day Aboriginal people have to their Countries. For me, one of the most profound moments in *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* is when Ashala is being taken to the machine for the final time, thinking she is about to die, and the wind brings her the scent of eucalyptus from the faraway Firstwood. She has, or so she believes, no hope of escape; but she is not alone.

I am sometimes asked what advice I would give to anyone who wants to be a writer, and one of the things I tell people is to aspire to greatness; never model yourself on the mediocre. For me, the best storytellers I know are Aboriginal Elders. So in writing about the Tribe, I thought about the way the Elders draw you into a tale that is always more than it first appears. I thought, too, about the generations of Palyku women who had gone before me, who had walked red earth and told the ancient tales of my people beneath the glittering stars of a desert night. Great storytellers, one and all. Their tales are like gifts that can continually be unwrapped, so filled with layers of meaning that you never reach the end of the wisdom the story holds or

the comfort that it brings. And I tried to honour that tradition by writing a tale that was, first and foremost, a riveting tale – as their stories always are – but that asked bigger questions about what has been, what is, and what will be.

My great-grandmother once described Australia as a place where everything lives and nothing dies. She was talking about a way of understanding the world as a web of living, inter-connected beings; where everything is born from, and eventually goes back to, the greater pattern of life itself. The oldest of our stories tell us that our Countries began with the creative Ancestors, in what is often called “the Dreaming”. These Ancestors came in many shapes – magpie and kangaroo; butterfly and serpent; sun and moon – and through their songs, dances and travels, the world was made.

The reality they shaped is both animate and interlinked; a world of ever-changing, ever-moving, ever-unfolding connections that stretch out across our homelands and encompass us all in living networks of relationships.

In such a world, the fact that we humans may not always understand the voices of other beings – the cry of Crow, the murmurings of Rain or Wind, or the slow rumble of Rock – does not mean those

voices do not exist. And it is through sustaining caring relationships with other shapes of life that we give substance and meaning to our own existence. When seen in the context of this greater pattern, all our actions and interactions with the world take on a larger significance. It is this idea which is captured, in much simpler terms, in the concept of “the Balance” – that “there is an inherent Balance between all life, and the only way to preserve it is to live in harmony with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth.”

In *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, it is one of the clever old spirits of the earth who survives the destruction of everything else. He travels through the chaos, carrying scraps of life in his mouth, and arrives at what will become the Firstwood. Then, as he tells Ashala, he sings – to remind life of its shapes, strength, and its many transformations. Until life remembers its nature, and grows.

To write a dystopia is to write of the end of the world. But in an animate, interconnected existence, where everything has consciousness and agency, life is not easily overcome. Its nature is always to adapt; to change; to make itself anew – and in so doing, to remake all else. This is the cry of the trees of the Firstwood: *We live. You live. We survive!*

Everything lives, and nothing dies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambelin Kwaymullina loves reading sci-fi/fantasy books, and has wanted to write a novel since she was six years old. She comes from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. When not writing or reading she works in cultural heritage, illustrates picture books and hangs out with her dogs. She has previously written a number of children's books, both alone and with other members of her family. *The Disappearance of Ember Crow* is her second novel.