



**THE  
TRIBE**

**AMBELIN  
KWAYMULLINA**

**THE DISAPPEARANCE OF**

**EMBER  
CROW**

## EDGES, CENTRES AND FUTURES

Reflections on Being an Indigenous  
Speculative-Fiction Writer

*Ambelin Kwaymullina*

**M**y name is Ambelin Kwaymullina. My people are the Palyku, of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. I write speculative fiction for young adults. And I often think of the words of Wunambal elder and poet Daisy Utemorrah, who wrote: ‘Do not go around the edges/or else you’ll fall/ No good that place/or else you slip.’<sup>1</sup>

Aboriginal people share a long experience of being forced to the edges with Indigenous peoples elsewhere on this planet. The edges of society, of history, and even of the consensus of reality. The centre ground of ‘truth’ is claimed by Eurocentric knowledge traditions, while ancient Indigenous understandings are labelled myth and

1 Daisy Utemorrah (author) and Pat Torres (illustrator), *Do Not Go Around the Edges*, Magabala Books, Broome, 1990, p 1.

legend, the stuff of metaphor rather than metaphysics. The diverse cultures of our many nations are subsumed into homogenous labels like ‘Aboriginal’, and the richness and complexity of our existence lost to racist stereotypes of ignorant savages.

These stereotypes are themselves birthed from what Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew describes as the creation myth of the settler nation-state. It is a myth that has been expressed in law in many variations, including ‘terra nullius’ (the idea that Australia was unoccupied because Aboriginal people did not have systems of government or law) and the ‘doctrine of discovery’ (the notion that title to land belonged not to the first inhabitants of a territory but the first Christian European nation to ‘discover’ it). But by whatever name it is known, the essence of this settler origin story is always the same, as is the position in which it places the original inhabitants of the seized territory. As Episkenew writes: ‘Indigenous peoples are sometimes cast as antagonists but more often dismissed as secondary characters who disappear partway through the narrative, and in general are worthy of mention only in relation to their interaction with the settlers. Indigenous people are minor characters in the remembered past ... disappear completely in the perceived present, and ... have no place in the anticipated future.’<sup>2</sup>

2 Jo-Ann Episkenew, *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*, University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, 2009, p 72

The settler-state origin myth forms and informs the first and most necessary tyranny of colonialism, the one that makes possible all that are to follow: the tyranny of indifference. The violence of the colonial project is a long violence, one that stretches over the years required to first take, then hold and work, the land. As such, it is a project that is inherently difficult to complete without a lack of empathy for those who are being dispossessed. I am conscious, always, of the many ways in which the Indigenous peoples of this planet continue to be pushed to the edges, those dangerous places where it is easy to fall out of the world.

The landmark 2009 United Nations ‘State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples’ report found that Indigenous peoples faced systemic discrimination and were over-represented among the poorest, the illiterate and the destitute, and that Indigenous peoples constituted approximately 5 per cent of the world’s population but 15 per cent of the world’s poor, and one-third of the world’s 900 million extremely poor rural people. To put these findings another way: we, the Indigenous peoples of this planet, are vulnerable, especially the oldest and youngest among us. We are also the holders of significant resources. We speak most of the world’s languages; we are the custodians of biodiverse environments and rich spiritual traditions; and we possess valuable ecological and cultural knowledge. But our vulnerability means our resources have all too often been exploited by others, and this includes our stories.

I am the inheritor of two sets of narratives. One set tells of a proud, ancient people, of generations of dancers, singers, and storytellers, and of lives lived in harmony with an animate universe. The other set tells of colonialism, its great injustices and daily cruelties, and the ways in which its legacy continues to shape our lives. These are the tales I carry with me and that influence the tales that I tell. To be an Indigenous writer is to be part of what Anishinaabe poet Armand Garnet Ruffo described as a community of voices that ‘addresses the relationship between colonizer and colonized, the impact of colonialism, and, moreover, functions on a practical level by striving to bring about positive change’.<sup>3</sup>

To be an Indigenous writer is also to be aware of colonial attitudes that long excluded Indigenous narratives from being considered literature at all. As Sámi academic Rauna Kuokkanen writes: ‘Due to differences in structure, format, storyline, mode of telling or expression and even purpose, Indigenous literary conventions are often rendered as “folklore”, “myths” and “legends” which usually carry the implicit message of being something less significant and noteworthy than “literature”.’<sup>4</sup> And Indigenous narratives rarely fit neatly into Western genre divisions. Some of

3 Armand Garnet Ruffo, ‘Why Native Literature?’ *American Indian Quarterly*, 21:4, 1997, p 664

4 Rauna Kuokkanen, ‘Border crossings, pathfinders and new visions: The role of Sámi literature in contemporary society’, *Nordlit: Tidsskrift i litteratur og kultur* 15: 92

the most outstanding Australian examples of Indigenous literature that crosses multiple genre boundaries are picture books that could as easily be defined as works of history, language, culture or art as they could as children's literature. These include narratives such as *Tjarany Roughtail* (Magabala Books), *Down the Hole* (IAD Press), and *Maralinga: The Anangu Story* (Allen & Unwin).

I am often told that it is unusual to be both Indigenous and a speculative-fiction writer. But many of the ideas that populate speculative-fiction books – notions of time travel, astral projection, speaking the languages of animals or trees – are part of Indigenous cultures. One of the aspects of my own novels that is regularly interpreted as being pure fantasy, that of an ancient creation spirit who sung the world into being, is for me simply part of my reality. And Indigenous people have been contributing to speculative fiction for many years, so much so that a multitude of stories were recently brought together in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, edited by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon. Speculative fiction – whether it involves works that might be traditionally thought of as fantasy, or as science fiction, or as anything in between – contains much else that is familiar to Indigenous peoples of this planet.

**F**or centuries, Indigenous people have been written about as the exotic, the savage, as childlike primitives

and as the helpless victims of ‘progress’ who quietly faded away in the face of superior European cultures. We have been written about as though our own cultures are frozen at some point in the distant past and as if we all look and act the same, so that – to the extent that there is any variation from someone else’s idea of us – we can be accused of not being sufficiently Indigenous. We have been written about as though non-Indigenous people are entitled to define our identities, our histories, and our ultimate destinies. I find all such works to be works of fantasy. And yet I would not find these writings in the speculative-fiction section of a bookstore; in fact, I wouldn’t even find them in the fiction section. These stories have been presented as history, as academic analysis, and as simple fact. My brother once told of what it was like to read about our Nanna in the files kept on her by the government:

[T]here are two features that define the story they weave about [my great-grandmother], absence and distortion. The feature of absence is a lie of omission, a story told as if she is a child in a room of adults, a person others must make decisions for. The other feature is one of distortion, my Nanna may be glimpsed on the fringes of the story or perhaps even play a pivotal role in the narrative, but it’s not really her...Distortion can also be read as absence, for the truth of the matter is my Nanna

is not in her file at all. My great-grandmother was one of the thousands of imaginary Aborigines held captive by the Aborigines Department...<sup>5</sup>

Indigenous peoples everywhere are familiar with fantasy because we have long been the subjects of it. And we know science fiction, too. We understand the tales of ships that come from afar and land on alien shores. Indigenous people have lived those narratives and, because of this, stories of colony ships exploring the vastness of space do not fill me with a sense of hope or excitement, but with dread. I am reminded of the words of Nyungar elder Joan Winch, who once told of a dream where she travelled back in time to see the first colonists arriving in the lands of her people: ‘I was hiding on the riverbank behind some trees watching these little boats going up the river. A huge V-formation of black swans were flying in front of them. As I watched, a terrible feeling of doom came into my heart and I said to myself, “This is the beginning of the end.”’<sup>6</sup>

Indigenous people lived through the end of the world, but we did not end. We survived by holding on to our cultures, our kin, and our sense of what was right in a world gone terribly wrong. One of the lessons taught to me by the

5 Blaze Kwaymullina, ‘Nanna and Me,’ *Westerly*, 2009, 54:2, p 35

6 Joan Winch, ‘A Feeling of Belonging’, in Sally Morgan et al (eds), *Heartsick for Country*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2008, p 228

lives of my ancestors is that defiance can be a series of small, secret acts rather than a single grand gesture. The Ngarla people have an old song, which tells of how they will evade a fence being put up around the infamous Port Hedland Lock Hospital:

In spite of all that and the parallel wires  
We'll still find a way  
Of continually exchanging little things  
Through the gaps and cracks.<sup>7</sup>

This song to me exemplifies so many quiet acts of resistance. It saddens me when I see the myth of Indigenous people as passive, unresisting victims being unthinkingly incorporated in contemporary works of literature. It surprises me, too, that anyone would find it reasonable that people living under oppressive regimes would put all of who they were on display for their oppressors to see. And I understand that in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, the centuries of fantasy stories generated about Indigenous people have contributed to a critical lack of frameworks to inform interpretation. As Rauna Kuokkanen writes, in regard to the Sámi people of northern Europe: 'People even in the Nordic countries and Russia – the countries where the Sámi live – continue to have limited knowledge about the Sámi people

7 Alexander Brown and Brian Geytenbeek, *Ngarla Songs*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2003, p 29

and Sámi literature ... The lack of knowledge results in a situation where contemporary Sámi issues and concerns are not understood because people in mainstream society do not have an adequate context for them.’<sup>8</sup>

Without context – without a grasp of the complexity and diversity of Indigenous existence – it can be all too easy for non-Indigenous people to repeat colonial story-cycles, or to misinterpret what knowledge they do have. I am a law academic as well as a writer; I often speak on Indigenous legal systems, and one of the questions I sometimes ask an audience is what they know about Aboriginal legal systems. At least one person will invariably respond ‘payback’. I tell them that defining Aboriginal legal systems in terms of corporal punishment is akin to defining the Anglo-Australian legal system in terms of life imprisonment. It reduces an entire system of laws to a bald statement of the severest sanction that might be applied to the most serious crimes recognised by the system. Where there is no context, it becomes easy to mistake a fragment of information for more than what it is.

This becomes an issue relevant to another question I am often asked: should non-Indigenous writers write about Indigenous characters? I don’t much like this question, because my answer to it can only ever be ‘it depends’ – and that is not a very helpful answer. I think a better question

8 Rauna Kuokkanen, *op cit* at n4, p 101

is, what are the boundaries, and how do non-Indigenous writers go about determining where they are in any given instance? Because boundaries do exist, and if there is an area where there is an absence of voices, that does not necessarily mean it is waiting to be filled by non-Indigenous authors. Sometimes silence also speaks.

I would like to see more partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, provided, of course, that those partnerships are equitable ones; I think great scope exists for a sharing of words, and worlds. And for anyone wishing to write of Indigenous peoples, I would advise them to begin by reading. Only don't read what others have written about Indigenous peoples. Read what Indigenous peoples write about ourselves. A useful starting point in Australia is the catalogue of Aboriginal publishers (Magabala Books, IAD Press and Aboriginal Studies Press), and guidance on writing on Indigenous peoples can be found in the Australia Council for the Arts *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Writing*<sup>9</sup> as well as the Australian Society of Authors papers, *Writing About Indigenous Australia* (written by Murri lawyer and author Terri Janke) and *Australian Copyright vs Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Property* (written by Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss).

9 Produced by Indigenous business Terri Janke and Company and Wiradjuri lawyer Robynne Quiggin, and peer reviewed by Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss.

**M**y name is Ambelin Kwaymullina, and I write about the future. Impossible things occur in my novels – teenagers with superpowers control fire or water or weather; huge lizards stalk the earth; animals communicate telepathically. And something else happens that some might say is yet more impossible than any of this. An alliance of good-hearted people come together to change their reality for the better. Some of these people are among the privileged of their society, and some among the oppressed: what they have in common is a desire for a world where all life is valued and valuable. I do not believe this alliance to be impossible.

I believe, as has been predicted by speculative-fiction writers before me, that humanity is now living in the times that will define the future of our species. And I end this article with ancestor wisdom, the words of my mother: ‘The possibility of good or evil, love or hate, justice or injustice, cruelty or compassion, destruction or protection, exists in every moment ... we only have to choose what story we will tell, what story we will live, what story we will pass on to the children who will one day follow in our footsteps. As we make, so are we made.’<sup>10</sup>

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10 Sally Morgan, ‘The Balance for the World’, in Sally Morgan et al (eds), *op cit* at n6, p 278