



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Wanamurraganya* by Sally Morgan and Jack McPhee. Published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, W.A.

(These reviews first appeared in *The Aboriginal Health Worker*, Vol.13 No.4, December 1989, and are reproduced with permission).

Sally Morgan is the author of *My Place* and her latest book, *Wanamurraganya*, has just been released. Whilst in Sydney recently she kindly gave up some time to talk to the journal [*The Aboriginal Health Worker*] about the role of Aboriginal writing and personal history in the community today.

When we met in her hotel room overlooking Sydney's Hyde Park, Sally Morgan was tired both from travelling (Fremantle to Sydney) and from all the talks she had given to the newspaper and radio journalists about her new book since her arrival, along with television coverage she received from her art exhibition the evening before. Yet Sally is such an honest and down to earth person, it is hard to believe that she can handle all the lime-light her fame has given her and not be affected by it. In fact, she is the opposite of a celebrity and plays down her own talents.

She herself was completely surprised by the instant recognition she received when her first book was published, since she had originally thought it would be of little interest to others and she had planned to publish it herself. For those few people who have not read *My Place*, Sally's first, highly successful book, it is the story of her search for and discovery of her true identity as an Aboriginal person, a truth that was hidden from her until she was a teenager.

She not only found out where she came from and some of her ancestry, but also a whole host of relatives who were still alive and willing to recognise and accept her into their family. One of those relatives was Jack McPhee, whose story Sally and Jack have told in their new book *Wanamurraganya*.

Sally's first book describes the pain and triumph involved in finding out about your past, who you really are. Jack's story is also the story of Sally's grandmother and her sisters and the many events that she would never discuss with Sally and her mother when she was alive. Sally grew up thinking she had Indian blood

and her real past was covered in silence. Her grandmother did this because she did not want her family to suffer as she had on the basis of being Aboriginal. To survive she remained silent. It is ironic that now the opposite is true for both authors who know what value recording the past holds for future generations. Jack has dedicated the book to "the people of the Pilbara and those who come after".

There is much in the past that has yet to be told, and much that has been told that is not true. After the enormous effort of her first book, it then took Sally over three years to record and transcribe Jack's telling of his story. For both of them it was a difficult task and sometimes painful, as tragic events become real again when brought to light. I asked Sally how she managed to avoid being bitter about the past, once she had learned the truth, and her reply was that she simply wrote the pain out - the necessity to tell the true story and redress two hundred years of false history being greater than her personal anger.

The events in Jack's life are not so very different from many other Aboriginal people of his generation who have worked in the pastoral industry. The outstanding feature in his book is the way in which the story weaves itself around and draws the reader in, so subtly and naturally that very quickly the fact that you are actually reading a book becomes forgotten. You are instead sitting in some warm and peaceful place listening to Jack's voice as the history of a remarkable man is unfolded and laid before you. Jack, like Sally, is a master in the art of narrative or story telling.

At the age of seven Jack was separated from his tribal family and put out to work on stations owned by squatters. He was forced to do a man's work, often without his promised pay, and could not refuse to do otherwise because he was controlled completely by the Aborigines Department of W.A. who protected him by selling him to squatters eager to exploit forced labour. As a youth he was beaten with such cruelty that he still bears the scars because he refused to cry. He was much in demand because he was a good worker, but he wanted something better for himself. He was smart and determined. Though denied the basic right of education, he taught himself to read and write by copying jam and flour labels.

But each time he tried to get ahead he came up against the barrier of white society that tried to stop him from gaining independence. As an Aboriginal person he was forbidden to own a

business or have a miner's license or occupy a job that a white person wanted. Each time he got ahead he was pushed back. He was finally convinced that the only way he could provide a home for himself and his family was to become an Australian citizen, which he was shocked to find out was not given to him at birth. Citizenship meant, in effect, that he had to cut all ties with his tribal family and abandon his culture. Somehow he never did. He was still Wanamurraganyaurru of Wanamurraganya, but he also had to be Jack McPhee, recognised white citizen.

Historically this section of the book is interesting because it helps us to understand why some people accepted citizenship, or "exemption", as it was called in the eastern states. Jack himself is very honest about his choice, and compares himself to his cousin who led the famous Pilbara strike, the longest Aboriginal strike in history, and refused to give in to the unjust terms of the pastoralists. Both men chose different methods with similar goals of self-determination and self-respect.

Jack won many battles, including a long one with alcohol. The measure of this great man lies in his ability to look beyond the wrongdoings of so many and see the good of individuals. He wanted to be himself, to be proud of his ancestry and his people, but also be his own person, self-sufficient and independent. He was always struggling to understand the reasons for the jealousy, ignorance, resentment, inhumanity and cruelty he was dealt by the white squatters who "owned" him and the Aboriginal Protection Agency who "sold" and "resold" and controlled him. There were times when Jack got ahead, even managed to buy his own property, which was and still is very unusual for Aboriginal pastoral workers, but he was always knocked down by those in control.

Yet Jack survived, despite tragedy and a hard fight with the grog and he won in the end. What could never be taken away from Jack still remains - his compassion, his love of humanity, his strength and his humour, and now his memories. He laments often that the songs of his people are being lost, but Jack's voice, warm and rich, will fill the ears and hearts of readers for many generations to come, thanks to his and Sally's efforts.

When the tale is over you feel the better for reading it. Jack is old now of course, and not too well, but he has done a great thing for his people, as Sally has done by putting his story down on paper so that it will never be lost. Jack hopes that his story will be given to school children to read and it has a message for young people growing up today.

Sally, too, sees the importance of recording the past to help the future, though she says that there is still not a lot of young people interested in helping elders record their valuable histories. This is potentially a great tragedy for Aboriginal people because, until we find out where we came from, we cannot find out where we are going. Still, she is sure that we will see more and more Aboriginal writers, particularly women, widening the field of Australian literature. When asked by someone about the future direction of white/black relations, Sally said, "you cannot have a vision of the future without justice for the past". In her foreword to *The Lost Children*, she explains this further:

Deceit and lies on behalf of government departments, sadness, confusion, lack of identity, breakdown of family ties and culture. The story of my family is not unique. It is echoed a thousand times over the length and breadth of Australia. It is important for us to discuss and detail such things, to reclaim the past, our families, ourselves; to have something to be; a framework within which we can exist and learn to be proud. In the telling we assert the validity of our own experience and we call the silence of 200 years a lie. And it is important for you, the listener, because like it or not we are a part of you. We have to find a way of living together in this country and that will only come when thousands of stories have been spoken and listened to with understanding.\*

Sally Morgan can definitely claim her place as one of the best modern writers of this decade. Not just in Australia, but internationally, her craftsmanship and narrative style are proof of her talent and her dedication to spreading the truth. And while we eagerly await the stories from a growing generation of new black voices, if they are anywhere as talented and determined as Sally Morgan to the skilful redressing of the wrongs of history, then our communities have much to look forward to.

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\* Taken from the foreword to *The Lost Children*, - Thirteen Australians taken from their Aboriginal families tell of the struggle to find their natural parents. Edited by Coral Edwards and Peter Read. Sydney, Doubleday, (1989), 198pp b&w, illus.