

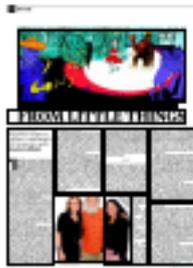


COPYRIGHT AGENCY

LICENSED COPY

Tel: +612 9394 7600

www.copyright.com.au



Weekend Australian, Australia

22 Jul 2017, by Rosemarie Milsom

Review, page 4 - 1,495.00 cm<sup>2</sup>

National - circulation 227,465 (S)

ID 814085641

BRIEF COPYRIGHT INDEX 1

PAGE 1 of 5

# FROM LITTLE THINGS

Australia's oldest independent indigenous publisher is celebrating its 30th anniversary, writes **Rosemarie Milsom**

**I** feel quite emotional." Leigh Hobbs, Children's Laureate, artist and bestselling author of more than 20 books, is sifting through folders of artwork that Broome artist Robyn Wells has been storing in her "undies drawer" for a decade. The colourful illustrations, a combination of painting and stencilling, are the result of lengthy collaboration between Wells and 23-year-old indigenous artist Joshua Button for the children's book *Steve Goes to Carnival*. Steve is a jazz-loving gorilla and Hobbs, whose immovably grumpy and well-travelled Mr Chicken has acquired fans across the globe, is especially taken with the pair's rendering of the main character and his four and two-legged friends.

"I love the artwork," Hobbs enthuses, "because there is nothing staged or overworked about it. It looks spontaneous and fresh, and it's a challenge for any big project to avoid looking tired and worn out. There's a spirit of an indigenous sensibility without it being generic, trite or cliched. There's such a feeling for the animals. I almost want to nuzzle that like a blue heeler," she adds, holding up an illustration of a jaunty Steve wearing a hat. "I'm not often surprised, but this is marvellous."

As is often the way in this laid-back West Australian town, the informal get-together at Wells's fibro home is unplanned. Hobbs and a long-time friend, illustrator Ann James, are en route to Derby where they'll be based for a week while working with students at the Nyikina Mangala Community School. The pair had earlier dropped by the office of Magabala Books, Australia's oldest independent indigenous publisher, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Among the numerous children's and adult titles on display in the office's light-filled shopfront it was *Steve Goes to Carnival* that captured the attention of Hobbs. A couple of phone calls later and Magabala's chief executive Anna Moulton is escorting the visitors to Wells's

home. It is a welcome coincidence that Button, a quiet presence, is there too.

The unique collaboration between the teacher's aide and her former student would not fly with a commercial publisher. A decade to complete a picture book? Unheard of. But is a perfect example of Magabala's unique approach, particularly in regard to cultural protocol and schedules (the planned 30th anniversary celebration in June was postponed because of a funeral of a local indigenous man).

Button, who is descended from the Walma-jarri people of the East Kimberley, first collaborated with Wells, who is not indigenous, in a literacy program at Broome's St Mary's College. He was in Year Five and struggling. Wells saw the creation of a book as a way of improving Button's language skills and the drawing and painting could develop his fine motor skills, which were affected by a learning disability. While they never set out to be published, their first picture book, *Joshua and the Two Crabs*, was picked up by Magabala and released in 2008. "They've been great," says Button. "They've helped me — both of us — out a lot. I trust them."

As one of the most geo-

graphically isolated publishers in the world — the closest capital city is Darwin, 1800km away — Magabala has quietly but determinedly built a solid reputation by supporting indigenous writers and illustrators across all genres, with a special focus on nurturing emerging talent. This month it launched the inaugural \$10,000 Kestin Indigenous Illustrator Award, which is funded by the Kestin Family Foundation. Hobbs, who is in high demand, offered to be a judge while sitting in Wells's Broome lounge room. He didn't even have to be asked.



Magabala Books began as a response to misappropriation. During a traditional song and dance festival held in September 1984 at Ngumpan, near Fitzroy Crossing, Aboriginal leaders decided an organisation would be established to protect the rights of traditional storytellers and artists. The Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre was formed and its publishing arm followed in 1987. Magabala Books was named after the bush banana that disperses its seeds far and wide across the region. Its first title, *Mayi: Some Bush Fruits of the*

**Weekend Australian, Australia**

22 Jul 2017, by Rosemarie Milsom

Review, page 4 - 1,495.00 cm<sup>2</sup>

National - circulation 227,465 (S)

ID 814085641

BRIEF COPYRIGHT INDEX 1

PAGE 2 of 5

*West Kimberley*, was a pocket-sized book written by trainee editor and designer Merrilee Lands and featured 10 Aboriginal contributors from five language groups.

*Wandering Girl*, the acclaimed autobiography by Glenyse Ward, followed and in March 1990 Magabala Books became an independent Aboriginal corporation. It has since published more than 250 titles.

"The original intention was to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytellers and artists in the area of publishing and copyright," says Edie

Wright, writer and chairwoman of Magabala's indigenous-only board. "Thirty years ago well-meaning researchers and writers were taking our stories with little or no acknowledgment and remuneration. In many ways the formation of Magabala was about self-determination. We wanted to be in control of the integrity and journey of our stories. It was part of that wider national movement at a time when Aboriginal people were saying, 'Enough is enough.' It had a moral purpose."

Wright, a retired teacher, regrets the absence of indigenous books when she was a child. "All we had was Enid Blyton. Then when I raised my two boys, books like *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie* and [*The Tale of*] *Peter Rabbit* were common. Now, as a grandmother, there are all kinds of books in different genres available. Being able to pick up *Staircase to the Moon*, by local author and illustrator Bronwyn Houston, and read it to the grandkids is special. They know the tides and can connect to the storyline. They can see their home, their story, in the book."

Magabala's founding editor Peter Bibby believes the publisher broke new ground from its inception. "We were putting the ownership of the stories back into the hands of the storytellers," he says. "We were completely focused on appropriate ownership and that meant working closely with people out in the field, going out to communities from which the stories came and

reading manuscripts to people. There weren't any shortcuts."

Bibby helped to train indigenous staff including publisher Rachel Bin Salleh, a Broome local who has worked for Magabala on and off for 20 years. She echoes Wright's view about the importance of indigenous stories to the younger generation. "It's essential that we see ourselves and our culture reflected back to us," she says. "When you live on the fringes and things aren't spoken about openly, you don't feel part of society. I have an Irish mother and my father is an Aboriginal Malay man from Broome, and when I was younger I never considered myself to be Australian. I felt like an immigrant in my own land because nothing about my identity, my history, was reflected back at me."

Magabala is uniquely placed to take advantage of a shift taking place among Australian readers, reflected in the critical and commercial success of writers such as Bruce Pascoe, Ellen van Neerven, Ali Cobby Eckermann and Stan Grant. The establishment of the biennial Kestin award is partly in response to an increasing demand for indigenous illustrators.

"There is a change," says Pascoe, whose award-winning 2014 title *Dark Emu* has helped Magabala achieve record sales. "I'm travelling around a lot and I'm meeting a completely new audience and a completely different enthusiasm than I've experienced in the past when I was promoting my books. Back then it was like Aboriginal Australia was a charity you had to support, like the Red Cross, but these days people are saying, 'We need to know more because this is part of our culture too.'"

"I think this shift is also because of younger Australians. In the last few years people have been consuming the films of Rachel Perkins, Warwick Thornton and Ivan Sen, and they've been watching TV ... *Redfern Now*, *Cleverman*. But also Stan Grant has helped. I just love the fact that 'young' Stan — I can call him that because I know his dad, 'old' Stan — is now having success by focusing our attention on Aboriginal issues. But we always have to remember there were many courageous Aboriginal people who laid the groundwork. I'm so grateful to those old people, the ones who helped create Magabala, and others who told our stories when no one wanted to listen."

*Dark Emu* will be reissued for children next year and Pascoe is working with indigenous writer-director Erica Glynn on an SBS documentary inspired by the book. For Pascoe, having written for other publishers, what sets Magabala apart?

"I don't have to explain Aboriginal history every time I write a book, which has been my experience with the others," Pascoe says. "It's



frustrating and wearying, and Aboriginal people do it so often in one form or another. I've had to explain why an Aboriginal woman is speaking like she is in a certain circumstance and with Magabala you don't have to do that because they know exactly why she would say it."

Poet Alison Whittaker, whose debut book *Lemons in the Chicken Wire* was published by

Magabala in March last year, believes indigenous writers face a range of challenges. "It varies from having to deal with colonial cultural norms to malicious use of our work and sometimes good old garden-variety racism," she says on the eve of her departure for Harvard Law School as a Fulbright scholar. She has nothing but praise for Magabala's publishing model. "It allows you to be a little bolder. Magabala will define the rest of my writing career."

Pascoe is "absolutely certain" Magabala's ethos, as well as the fact it has an experienced indigenous publisher in Bin Salleh, has encouraged Aboriginal storytellers to come forward. "And I think they also keep other publishers honest," he adds. "It's only in recent times that metropolitan literary circles have paid any attention to Aboriginal writing at all so now that people are starting to take notice I think that they need to remember that it was Magabala who did the hard yards."

The "hard yards" have included some extremely lean years, though under the leadership of Moulton, who joined Magabala in 2014 with 20 years' experience in arts management — much of it in indigenous organisations in the Kimberley — the future is looking bright. Last year the corporation secured four-year funding from the Australia Council and three-year funding from the West Australian Department of Culture and the Arts. And while Magabala's contribution to the educational market is well recognised, Moulton and the board are working hard to ensure there is increased awareness of its commitment to a range of genres, including adult fiction, memoir, nonfiction and poetry. Says Wright: "While Magabala is indigenous-owned and we publish the work of indigenous authors, we try to eschew the restrictive notion of 'indigenous literature.'"

As the non-indigenous head of an Aboriginal corporation (most of Magabala's team of seven is indigenous) Moulton is acutely aware of what "you don't know". Her approach is to surround herself "with people who will guide you". She adds: "No matter how long you have worked for or with Aboriginal people, you can never talk for or claim an Aboriginal perspective."

She, too, pays tribute to the foresight of the

group of elders who gathered in the dirt in Fitzroy Crossing more than 30 years ago. "They had a very strong vision for what they wanted to achieve, which was to ensure their culture was passed on to their children and future generations. There was also this strong hope that by sharing their stories with non-indigenous people, understanding and respect would follow, and things would change for the better."

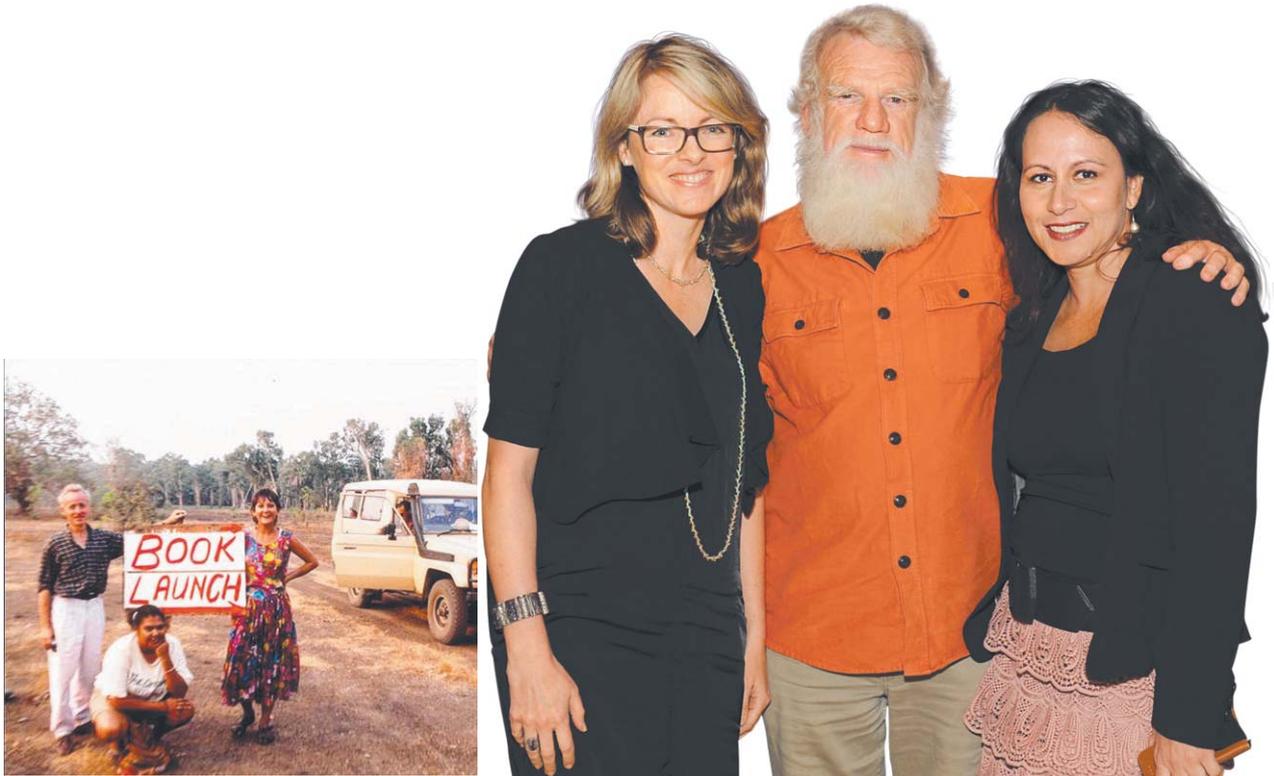
## IT'S ESSENTIAL THAT WE SEE OURSELVES AND OUR CULTURE REFLECTED BACK TO US

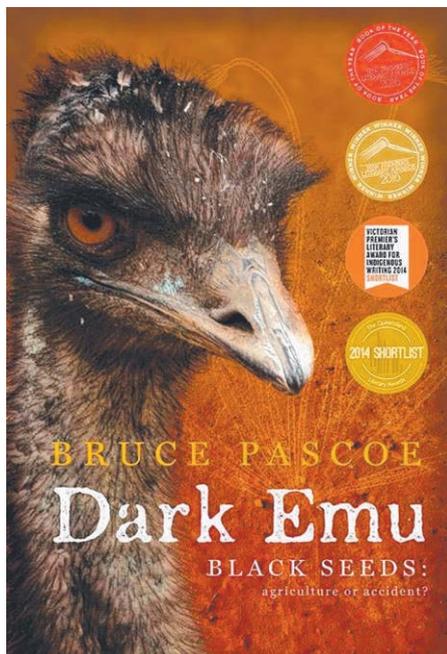
RACHEL BIN SALLEH





Illustration from *Steve Goes to Carnival* by Joshua Button and Robyn Wells; bottom, chief Anna Moulton and publisher Rachel Bin Salleh with Bruce Pascoe





The indigenous festival at Ngumpan, near Fitzroy Crossing, in 1984, which sparked the founding of Magabala, far left; Pascoe's award-winning 2014 title *Dark Emu* has helped Magabala achieve record sales, left; Magabala founder Peter Bibby with Merrilee Lands, right, and June Oscar (c. 1990), below far left; poet Alison Whittaker, below left