

How That First Book in Print Changed My Life, or Not

By Ali Cobby Eckermann

In 2001 I studied Creative Writing in Alice Springs, a remote town in central Australia. This is the traditional land of the Arrernte (Aranda), who still live there. I undertook my studies at the Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE), an Aboriginal college. I was in a small class, led by Palawa educator and author Terry Whitebeach, a courageous and energetic Aboriginal woman from Tasmania. She is an amazing teacher who helped change the path of my life.

This was also the year I found my son. He turned 18 on 11 February that year, and I signed the paperwork to relocate him on that very same day. These are the rules birth parents must follow after relinquishing their child for adoption. The organization “Link Up” helped locate him; helping to trace family members of Stolen Generations people is their primary task. I received the good news by phone six weeks after signing on.

So it was an emotional year. I had found my own mother four years before; now I was the mother welcoming back my child. Poetry provided sanctity for the expression of my emotional state, and the classroom, an essential sanctuary.

Within Aboriginal families we share a kinship system. My son and I spent much of our time together with me introducing him to extended family networks in and around Alice Springs. We shared many stories, both historical and contemporary. I also wrote poems on behalf of family members to enjoy around our campfires. I wrote many poems for the many Stolen Generations people I met, who were also reconnecting with their families.

Later, in 2007, I was living and working at Titjikala, on the edge of the Simpson Desert. It was there that I learnt the ‘power of the pen’. During this period, In August 2007, the Federal Government passed a controversial policy termed the *Northern Territory Emergency Response*, which required the abolishment of the Racial Discrimination Act, and which undermined the rights of Traditional Owners, the senior Aboriginal custodians of the land. It became more infamously known as The Intervention. Former Prime Minister John Howard based this decision on the findings of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report – released in 2007 by the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse – that claimed paedophilia rings and child sexual abuse were rampant in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (NT). As a result, a total of 73 Aboriginal communities and town camps were targeted in *Operation Outreach*, which involved about 600 soldiers from the Australian Defence Forces, led by Major-General David Chalmers. Many Aboriginal soldiers from *NorForce* were also deployed to ‘protect’ the bureaucrats delivering the new policies. It was a strange and mixed message.

This policy branded Aboriginal people negatively and at a terrible cost. I wrote about it firsthand. Family and community members asked me to speak for them in those uncertain times; and so I did. This work culminated, in 2008, with my unpublished manuscript, *Little Bit Long Time*, being selected by the Australian Poetry Centre for their New Poets series. The series was published in 2009, and launched in Alice Springs.

Many traditional Aboriginal people came to that launch. It was for all of us. The Arrernte families told me how important it was to them, to hear their stories from the stage. They felt at last that they had a ‘voice’. My poem *Intervention Pay Back* was then published around the world.

BREAKING IN, BREAKING OUT

Yes, my first book changed the course of my life. It granted me an important role within my family, who still lives on a different plane away from the influences of modern western society. Just as importantly, it solidified my identity as an Aboriginal writer. Often wedged between two worlds, I have a responsibility to tell the truth – which often contradicts the portrayal of Aboriginal peoples in the media – for the sake of my family. It is the best task that has ever been given to me.