

Red Dirt Talking

Jacqueline Wright

About the Book

Let me tell you, there's a lot of stories going around about that girl. Lotta stories. Stories from the local rag. Stories from the townies, the station folk, the mob. Then there's the police. Plenty stories there. No one can work it out, everyone's gotta theory and with my job, I get to hear them all, whether I like it or not. (p. 5)

From the very first page, Jacqueline Wright has the reader guessing about the mysterious disappearance of Kuj, an eight year old Aboriginal girl. *Red Dirt Talking* is narrated from two alternating perspectives: that of Annie, an anthropology student from Perth, and the rough and ready voice of Maggot, local garbo at the Western Desert town of Ransom. Other voices chime in – via textual fragments, interview transcripts and lively dialogue – and the reader, like Annie, comes to know and understand the members of the community better.

When Annie Fletcher took up postgraduate studies in anthropology, she didn't expect they would take her to the north-western edge of the country, and in particular to a remote community 370 km south-west of the township of Ransom. For Annie, initially at least, living in Yindi, she *feels like a foreigner in her own country* (p. 21).

In the beginning, in the shock of climate and cultural acclimatisation, she *sits listlessly on the verandah watching time seep away into the roaring blue of the sky. She hadn't thought it would be like this. She imagined she'd be sitting cross-legged in the sand, sharing the shade with a family under a tree listening to stories which would break her heart. She'd thought that for people with no voice, she would become their voice* (p. 22).

Annie is determined to dig up and record the story of the Rumble Crossing massacre and present it at the United Nations South Seas Forum for Indigenous Peoples. But the local community won't talk – not to her, anyway. As weeks of mind-boggling heat go by in the build-up to the wet season, Annie becomes weary of the transportable accommodation she is forced to share with the laconic Mick Hooper, project officer for Yindi Community. In desperation she finds herself doling out paint at the local art centre, stretching canvasses, making tea and getting roped into driving everyone everywhere. Annie's patience is tried even more when Mick refuses to see the value in her work. An indignant Annie reflects: *I don't understand why people see what I'm doing as a huge threat. How can it hurt to have their voice heard?* (p. 79)

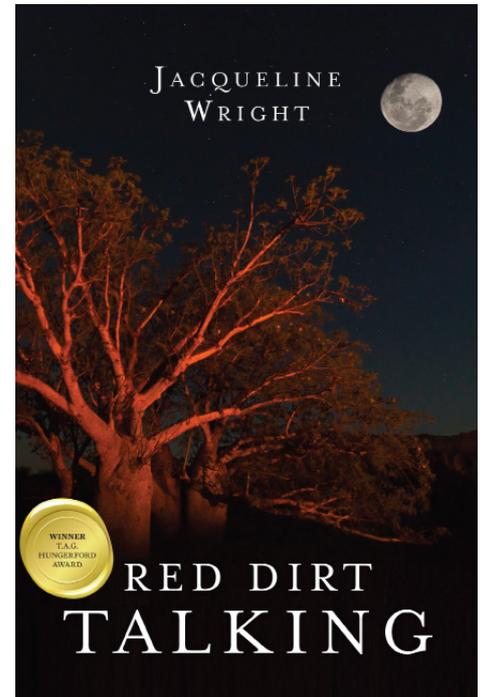
But as she settles in, Annie begins to trust the locals, and they her. Theory gives way to practice. She tunes in to the desert's rhythm. She talks less and listens more. She even stops sifting the weevils out of her tea before she drinks it. Community life unravels in front of Annie in all its complexity, and the violent, not-so-distant colonial past throws shadows over the present of those around her, like Stirling Yartalu and Mysterly Dusic.

While Maggot and his crew are being hassled by the Ransom cops and mosquitoes, Jumbo Callip, the missing girl's father, is throwing threats and punches around town, and sleek, self-assured lawyer Johanna is romancing with an allusive hydrozoner whose interest in the girl seems suspicious.

The tension builds as Cyclone Clive approaches and the search deepens for Kuj, and the truth behind the town's wild speculations.

About the Author

Jacqueline Wright worked for many years as a teacher and linguist in the Pilbara and Kimberley on Indigenous Australian Aboriginal language, interpreting and cultural programs. In 2000 she took on the regional literature position promoting and developing literary activities and improving opportunities for writers in the north-west of Western Australia. Now she swings two part-time jobs working as publishing intern at Magabala Books and a sports producer at ABC Radio, Broome. She completed a Creative Arts Doctorate at Curtin University.



From the Author

Can you tell us about the genesis of your book?

There are times in your life which take unexpected sharp turns, shake you up a bit and make you reassess what's important in life. Moving from the wet, cold greenness of Tassie to the north-west of Australia, from a city to a remote Aboriginal community, was one of those turns. I have three journals from that time in my life. They are stuffed full of writing, sketches, letters, notes, cuttings from magazines and newspapers, pressed flowers, feathers ... you name it. These journals were the genesis of *Red Dirt Talking*. If I could pinpoint the exact time in my life when I 'grew up' that would be it – I was thirty years old when I grew up! I just knew I had to do something more with those journals. I was between jobs when I dragged them out of storage. They were mouldy and nibbled by white ants. I blew the red sand of the Great Sandy Desert from those pages and, as I read through them again, I was suddenly struck by the thought that I had to write a novel.



In what ways is the book based on your own experience of Australia's north-west?

In a thematic sense, the book is based on my own experience; my awe of the north-west, its astounding beauty, the wake-up call that I was living in someone's country and that I was very ignorant of my own in so many ways, the friendships I formed, those sorts of things. But, the novel is in no way autobiographical (except for the minor detail of a woman who goes to live in the north-west!). My characters are conglomerates of many people I've known both in the north-west and elsewhere. Even the town of Ransom is a mix of north-western towns I have known. And the storyline? Well that's where my imagination kicked in.

Did you visualise this story in two narratives right from the start, or was it something that emerged as you were writing?

I tried writing this novel through one voice. Annie and Maggot had a crack at telling it, and so did Matt, but the result was really unsatisfying. I found I couldn't write it through one voice, so I thought, why waste all that work, why not try and concertina all those voices together? Well, it sounded like a good idea at the time, but talk about making a rod for my own back! It was the beginning of a journey that lasted almost ten years. But I'm glad I persevered. Multiple stories from different perspectives are really important: just have a look at our country and how damaging it has been to have history narrated from a narrow all-too-frequently white perspective. The story of our nation is all the more richer and robust with the inclusion of different voices no matter how difficult this may be for both the tellers of those stories and the people listening to them.

The range of voices in Red Dirt Talking is extraordinary – from the observant, likeable Maggot to the lost and vulnerable Stirling, and lively, canny Louisa. Can you tell us about the process and challenges of bringing multiple languages and voices together?

The trunks I inherited from my father in the shed are full of folders. Foolscap folders labeled 'Maggot 1', 'Maggot 2', 'Maggot 3', 'Suzie' (the original Annie), 'Transcripts', 'Other', etc. In them are successive drafts of these characters' stories, along with bits and pieces of things I'd thought 'belonged' to them; turns of phrases, stories from the media, anecdotal stuff. Then I have a whole other trunk full of arch lever folders from draft 1 to draft 12. The arch lever folders were like the big bowl I used to mix all the foolscap folders together. I'd add a little bit of Annie in with Maggot, more Annie, still more Annie and a pinch of Stirling. I had fun with those drafts, I'd finish them, put them away for a week then read them and find out that I'd have to write a backstory to explain to the reader why character X suddenly decided to do Y. Initially, Maggot drove the narrative. I had chapters which I called the 'ing' chapters, 'Telling', 'Dreaming', 'Collecting', etc. Then I had the Annie 1–12 chapters, but somehow Annie took over and Maggot bowed to overwhelming pressure (she's relentless as you know!). And then there were the stories screaming out to me from the other folders to be included. Most of the time, amazingly enough, these stories slipped nicely into the storyline. By this stage, I was pretty close to the novel, so my writing group and, later, my friends were instrumental in reading through successive drafts and telling me, 'I don't get why such-and-such is so angry about this?' So I'd have to rewrite to make this clearer. It was a very organic process. My mum always said that I was Thursday's child and worked hard for a living. She was right about this when it came to *Red Dirt Talking*.

Would you say your work as editorial intern with Magabala Books has affected your approach to writing, and in what ways?

Working as an editorial intern gives you 'big picture'. It shows you that the writer is part of a much bigger equation, an important element, but one element nonetheless. It has shown me that writing is bigger than the sum of its parts. A good editor who understands the writer, their work, and what they're trying to do can turn good writing into something excellent. And the marketing mob can show writers how to write something that's not just saying the same old, same old ... but making a new, unique and exciting contribution to Australian literature.

What's next for you?

There's a couple of things I'm interested in which will be nothing like *Red Dirt Talking*. Remember those sharp turns I was talking about? Well, I've found they don't just happen to you in life, they occur with your writing. I've been given the opportunity to do some playwriting, so I might have a go at adapting *Red Dirt Talking* as a play. I'm also really interested in doing some creative non-fiction. I met a woman in the Adelaide airport transit lounge, when my flight to Perth was cancelled. She told me an incredible story and wanted me to write it down. I can't do it as fiction, that would be a cop-out, but I didn't want to go down the non-fiction road. So now I'm thinking about taking the middle ground. And then there's my idea for another novel that has nothing to do with the north-west. I'm not going to give it away but it will involve bowing to the overwhelming pressure of social media and getting a Facebook account.

Questions for Discussion

- The story is told alternately from two points of view: Maggot's (in the first person) and Annie's (in the third person). What difference does it make that this story is not just told by one or the other?
- How does the narrative style affect the way the mystery around Kuj unfolds?
- What obstacles stand in Annie's way of gathering the information she wants for her research?
- *'Prevention, remedy and strategy.' She ticks the forum's themes off on her fingers. 'That means better health, education and essential services. It's the trickle-down effect.' 'Trickle's the word,' Mick says tossing the pump between his hands and frowning.* (p. 80) The longer Annie stays in Yindi, the shakier her confidence becomes in the forum's power to help the community. Why is this? How does Annie's perception of her own role in the community change? How does her perception of her own anthropological 'mission' alter?
- *There is a voice but to hear it she has to listen, really listen, not for words but the silence between words.* (p. 149) What role does silence play in communication at Yindi? How does Annie interpret the silences of the Yindi artists and those of Mick? How does Annie's understanding of silence change over the course of the book?
- What role does the landscape of the north-west play in the narrative?
- How is knowledge portrayed in the novel? How is it viewed from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives? What are some examples which highlight differences between white and Indigenous systems of knowledge? How are these difference portrayed?
- What is the role of Mick in the narrative, apart from playing a 'romantic lead'?
- The Family and Child Services deem Mysterly to be an unfit guardian for her granddaughter Kuj. Annie says: *Well she is and she isn't.* (p. 276) In what ways is Mysterly an unfit guardian and in what ways is she not? Do you think Kuj is better off under Mysterly's care or away from her?
- What is the nature of Annie's own relationship to the children of the community, especially after she begins her recuperation?
- *[...] When I sit along by myself, I think about all the good things that there would happen if they'd let me grow up with my mob. Nobody can give me that back ...' he spits into the sand. 'It's not here for me, you know. The old people, well they keep tellin' me, stay – go through the Law but ...' he kicks the post so hard that the roof shakes. 'They told me that my mum didn't want me and that I had dirt in my veins, all in one day. And then I had to write out two hundred times, "God is Love". He sits heavily on the bottom step. 'Anyway,' he says putting his head in his hands.* (p. 287) Stirling Yartalu, who like Kuj has 'mixed' parentage, was forcibly removed from his family as a child and put under the guardianship of the Chief Protector of the Department of Native Affairs. What has been the impact of this removal on Stirling? What is the meaning of his violent death?
- Matthew is another child who has been removed from his mother at birth and who has a fractured relationship with her now. How does Matthew respond differently to Stirling to this displacement?
- *'Y'know all those marta-marta kids that got taken away from their families by whitefellas? Well this time the blackfellas took her away from her white father.'* (p. 50) What contribution does this novel make to the conversation about white–Indigenous relations, past and present?
- How does Annie's relationship with her daughter Pie change over the course of the book, and what brings about this change?
- Wright never directly mentions the race of her characters. This is perhaps contrary to the expectations of the reader. How does the reader determine the race of characters in this book? Were there any characters whom you mistook to be Aboriginal when they were not, or vice versa? What made you reassess your assumption and at what point in the book? Why does Wright allow this ambiguity?
- *Now listen up,* says Maggot at the end of the novel (p. 346) and then one final story is told. Whose is the voice speaking at the end of the novel? How can we 'make sense' of this voice?
- What has happened to Kuj? What are the reasons for Maggot's sentiments expressed in the novel's final lines?
- What role does the spoken and written word play in the novel?