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Abstract

Pat Torres is based in Broome, Western Australia. Her book *the Story of Crow* was written with her aunt Magdalene Williams, one of the last fluent speakers of Nyul Nyul, the traditional language of the people of Beagle Bay in Western Australia. Pat graduated from university with a BA degree and a Diploma of Education. When she did her degree ten years ago there were only 22 Aboriginal graduates in Australia. Funded by the Australian Bicentennial Authority's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, the stories are published by the first Aboriginal publishing house, Magabala Books, an arm of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre.

Writing for Children

INTERVIEW WITH PAT TORRES

INTRODUCTION

Pat Torres is based in Broome, Western Australia. Her book *the Story of Crow* was written with her aunt Magdalene Williams, one of the last fluent speakers of Nyul Nyul, the traditional language of the people of Beagle Bay in Western Australia. Pat graduated from university with a BA degree and a Diploma of Education. When she did her degree ten years ago there were only 22 Aboriginal graduates in Australia. Funded by the Australian Bicentennial Authority's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, the stories are published by the first Aboriginal publishing house, Magabala Books, an arm of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre.

Carolyn Osterhaus

Pat Torres was interviewed by Carolyn Osterhaus in October, 1988.

When and why did you start publishing?

My first two books came out in March this year. The reason why I started to publish was that I thought the stories I was told as a child could be shared by other Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal children. I found I got a lot of positive information and culture and history out of these stories and I saw the need for other people to appreciate the good things about Aboriginal culture and lifestyle.

Was it a conscious decision to start with writing for children or did it just happen that way?

It was fairly conscious. I started out 10 years ago just basically finding out my own personal background. Along the way came many stories, Dreamtime

stories relating to my tribal group. I'm trained as a primary teacher, and I've been involved in Aboriginal education for at least 10 years. I thought I should make some attempt to use all my skills to give information back to the community. By doing that I'm also strengthening my own background.

Do you expect the children's books you are publishing to reach a non-Aboriginal audience as well as an Aboriginal one?

Yes, of course. To me there's a great gap in the materials for children about Aboriginal people, about Aboriginal culture and education. Previous material is really aimed at adult readers.

Having read these books to my own four children, I found it was difficult for them to understand what was happening just by reading the text. I had to explain a lot of the text to them. The words involved a lot of explanation. Because I am trained at primary level, I thought I might be providing a service by preparing books for children both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal at the early childhood reading level.

I've also been involved in early childhood workshops with the National Aboriginal Education committee which indicated a great lack of relevant material. The curriculum material normally used for Aboriginal studies was inappropriate or irrelevant at times. I wanted to start at the very early reading levels to bridge the gap. I've got an interest in doing books and providing materials for language areas, social studies and science. My ten years of research has resulted in a lot of information and I now need time to develop various education kits.

Are they already being used in schools which Aboriginal children attend?

There are a number of schools using my books and it's increasing every day. For example, the Queensland Department of Education has reviewed my books with the idea of placing them on a list in Aboriginal Studies. In Western Australia, Nulungu College will be using them. Most major school libraries have requested them and they've been advertised in the Aboriginal Education Resources Unit magazine *Djawalidi*. People are writing to Magabala Books quite regularly as they become aware of them. Most major centres know about them.

Is the lack of a common Aboriginal language a problem when it comes to your publications?

My books are bilingual using both English and Aboriginal languages. Wherever the story comes from, I feature the language of that place. I don't find the lack of a common Aboriginal language a problem. The many languages show the richness and complexity of Aboriginal people and their society. I imagine it would be difficult if you wanted to teach one major language in schools. I think people should probably take up the language most relevant to the area they come from, to feature the local language if possible.

In the Kimberleys they teach kids a common orthography. The children use their own language background. I try to help non-Aboriginal readers in understanding how to pronounce words in the books by providing a key, by using the common orthography for that Aboriginal language and by providing a dictionary of all the meanings. I'll do that for every language group that I feature. This may prove difficult in some places because groups in the West Kimberleys have been asked how they would prefer their language written down and this has resulted in a variety of approaches.

One of my major thrusts has been making my material bilingual. I've been trained in linguistics and I have about four Aboriginal languages that I was involved in in my childhood. I know that a lot of people, and my children, are interested in language – it helps to strengthen your identity more if you have your language intact.

Because the Aboriginal language is an oral not a written one, is something lost in writing down the language?

I try to look at it in a realistic sense as much as possible. I would prefer to use the oral tradition but the society we live in today is largely not an Aboriginal system and it's very hard to maintain the traditional ways of handing down the cultural and historical information and expect our children to learn the stories off by heart. So the materials have to be written down. If the old people are gone, your stories are gone too, and to get them down you mostly have to get them down in written form. You do lose a lot

in terms of body language and emphasis but at times there are no funds to record the information on tapes with good quality field equipment.

I am concerned that so many languages are under threat and that so many stories will die when the old people go. I also do tapes wherever possible but I had no funds to do tapes of my recent books. In future I will be aiming to provide tapes with my books.

What do you think of Maureen Watson's use of traditional Aboriginal forms to tell modern stories?

I'm very impressed by her. She does maintain the old tradition very strongly through her use of traditional storytelling. I'm a younger woman and I hope that I can follow in her footsteps. But perhaps most of my work will be in a written form because there is a big need for written materials in schools. Maureen is able to visit schools and lecture and do things in an oral way. In Western Australia, but especially the Kimberleys, no one pays you to do your stories. Storytelling is not something people do very regularly in institutions such as those that Maureen Watson has had the opportunity to perform in. We have a different sort of social situation. We are still battling with attitudes, and storytelling programs need to be argued for and justified.

In the past Aboriginal traditional information was handed down in an oral and musical form. Our stories of Dreamtime and the ways people should treat each other were done through stories around campfires and through law and ceremony. Because of the educational process being interrupted we have to look at different ways of passing the information on. Many Aboriginal people don't have a strong land base to practise their traditional ways of passing on knowledge. We have to look at other ways of doing it. Books, music and tapes are all we've got left to do it with.

Why do you do your own illustrations?

There's a lack of Aboriginal people doing designs and I'm trying to develop my own Aboriginal art form based on a style encompassing cave drawings, Mimi art figures and using line drawing techniques. I just sort of picked it up along the way. No one else was drawing these things in my environment. A lot of my drawings have been shown to me in dreams by my ancestors.

They are the creative energy for my inspiration for illustrating. They've shown me how to draw the figures and have given me the images.

Do you think that the books you publish can and/or will have an effect on the way Aboriginal culture is perceived by whites?

Yes, I do, I go for positive things. A lot of materials previously provided for children in school have showed Aboriginal people in a negative way or living life styles no longer relevant today. Most materials available in schools still show people running around naked in the bush. Nowadays people go hunting but they go hunting with a gun and a Toyota, once again adapting things to fit our needs. Many of these materials still concentrate on pre-contact Aboriginal society and don't show us as we are, namely Aboriginal people living in a contemporary way. Very few Aboriginal people, even people in traditional communities, run around naked in the bush. My books are trying to give a positive portrayal of the Aboriginal people.

Since 1983 I have been working on a reading kit called *Ngaagkiti*. It's a collection of Kimberley oral histories containing about 60 stories and 40 poems which are stories about contemporary experiences of Aboriginal people. It's basically done in English with many Aboriginal words and phrases used in the storytelling. It's going to be produced like a reading card and feature stories, art work, maps locating the areas plus information about the author with multi-disciplinary activities such as comprehension and dictionary meanings. It can be used in a language program, social studies and history programs. My own view is that Aboriginal Studies should be integrated throughout the school curriculum. Most people tend to treat it like a separate unit.

Most of the Aboriginal stories and poems published for children are traditional ones. Are they stories that Aboriginal children will be familiar with or are the books intended to teach them stories they don't know?

What I found in the Kimberleys was that our traditions and culture are still very strong. We still have chances to go to traditional ceremonies, so many of us are familiar with many of the traditional stories. But there are also many who have been removed from their background. These books are

giving those children back what they don't know while many have heard these stories or another form of them as they are growing up. We do share many stories throughout Australia and the local group may add on a bit more information as the story travels along. for example, about the kangaroo or the crow. Names may change as the stories move to different areas but once you tell the story the children can often provide their own stories from their groups.

Hadja Press in Melbourne published a book about an Aboriginal girl going to a Land Rights march. Do you have any plans to publish stories of Aborigines in urban environments or are you exclusively interested in traditional stories?

I guess you'd call me a country person. I tend to write from my own background. My stories will basically come from the Kimberleys, and so will be traditional or about the war days, how Aboriginal people were involved in the war.

One story I'd like to do in the future is about a woman, essentially the story of my mother, but I want to do it at a reading level for a child. My mother is a special person, given special spiritual gifts from my Yawuru great-grandfather. As she grew older she became bewildered; perhaps because of not understanding the differences between the two societies she found herself living in. She grew up in a time when black was wrong and Aboriginal women were subject to a lot of hassles. She became confused and tried to make it in the white man's world then realised in later years it was not the path to go. She felt very insecure in that part. My mum has gone back to traditional ways and is much happier in the ways of her life. She's realised her spiritual potential. It was very hard for her and she's thinking about writing her own book. She was a single parent in the days when this was not socially acceptable, however, she managed to achieve many good things in her life. For example, she was the first Aboriginal woman employed as a cocktail waitress. She was good looking and had to face a lot of negative comments from men.

Aboriginal people are very spiritual people. We're able to relate to things on a spiritual level. We are talking for example about the kinds of spiritual gifts possessed by psychics or mediums. Aboriginal society has those kinds of parallels. My mum has special powers to heal, to realise things that are

going to happen. It's difficult to explain what I want to say as there are few words in the English language to describe these sensations; you really need to understand European spiritualism to understand what I'm trying to say.

Gurrwayi Gurrwayi, The Rain Bird

Gurrwayi Gurrwayi
It's the Rain bird call,
Don't hurt him or kill him,
Or the rain will always fall.

