

## Introduction

As I write, the brush turkey is making a nest outside the window, scratching the earth, gathering leaves, to the beat of my typing. I kneel on the lounge to look through the window and I don't see the bird, because it's underneath me. I don't see the bird, but I hear the bird.

I am writing on unceded Yagera and Turrbal dhagan. I acknowledge the First Nations of all of the contributors in this book, including my own Yugambeh Nation. This collection's stories are organised by author, in descending alphabetical order. There are twenty stories by twenty writers plus a story of mine, as an offering. 'Each City' was first published in the anthology *Kindred: Twelve queer #LoveOzYA stories* in 2019.

All the stories gathered in *Flock* have been previously published or presented. The span of publication ranges from 1996 to 2021: twenty-five years, though the roots of these First Nations stories span generations, this book being part of a much bigger conversation. Many collections have come before this one, too many to mention. Many a gathering of stories has occurred on this continent since time immemorial. We owe a great deal to our literary Elders who came before us.

For me the title *Flock* perfectly fits this collection. We all have our own pair of beautiful wings, but we fly together in formation. Contributor Bryan Andy called it the ‘most affirming title ever’, when I first emailed him about this book. The title is, in part, inspired by contributor Jeanine Leane’s tribute to our beloved Kuracca Kerry Reed-Gilbert who we lost in 2019. Jeanine’s obituary, published in *Overland* magazine, goes as follows:

*Like the kuracca, that is a sentinel bird – always watching over the rest of the mob, Aunty Kerry nurtured, encouraged and inspired a generation of writers.*

When I read that, I was reminded of how Aunty KRG brought us together under the banner of the First Nations Australian Writers Network, of which she was a co-founder and the inaugural chair. In August 2018, in what was to be her last year as FNAWN chairperson, Aunty convened a large diverse gathering of First Nations writers in Canberra from all states and territories.

Jeanine’s tribute continues:

*On the morning that she passed, a mob of kuracca flew in, dipping low in a thick cloud over her old home, calling her passing across the sky, taking her spirit home. Vale Kuracca, Aunty Kerry Reed-Gilbert, as you fly high and safe on the journey back to your Dreaming. Under your wings is the strength of us as Black writers.*

When I hear the distinctive sharp yelp-caw sound of the kuracca (sulphur-crested cockatoo in the Wiradjuri language, geira in mine) flying overhead, I see Aunty watching over us. I know she would have been incredibly proud of this collection.

A painting by Kukula McDonald features on the cover of this book. I've been wearing Kukula McDonald's *Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo* print on a t-shirt for many years now. Mum bought it for me as a present from Papunya when she was living in Alice Springs and I loved it from the moment I saw it. Admittedly, the tee is a bit tight on me compared to what it used to be, but I still wear it often. The brushstrokes and colours on the solid black material are often remarked upon, particularly by mob.

Kukula's artwork immediately came to mind when we started to think about covers for this book and what the book represents. I am thrilled we can feature Kukula's mob of redtails on the cover; for me, it symbolises what this book is about. Together we are stronger. We flock together.

The process of choosing the works for this collection took several months. Yasmin Smith was an incredible editorial assistant. And my mum, Maria van Neerven-Currie, was an important sounding board. The stories come from single-authored short story collections as well as literary journals and previous anthologies. Archie Weller's story was first published in the important *Australian Short Stories*, a journal started up by Bruce Pascoe and Lyn Harwood. Jeanine Leane's story was first published in a special cross-cultural 2014 edition of Maori literary journal *Ora Nui*, edited by Anton Black and Aunty Kerry Reed-Gilbert. The opening story, Alexis Wright's 'The Chinky Apple Tree', featured in *Across Country: Stories from Aboriginal Australia* (1998), edited by Kerry Davies. The final

story, Bryan Andy's 'Moama', was performed at the Bogong Moth Storytelling night at the Blak & Bright festival directed by Jane Harrison in 2019.

The writers in this collection are well-known and award-winning, as well as emerging and new. Their stories span generations, geographies and genres. Some are touching, some gritty, some funny, many are all three. Some contributors write from autobiographical experiences, others do not. Publisher Aviva Tuffield helped by listening to my vision for the book. I wanted to select a diverse range of stories that showcased the art of a good short story, as well as being strong monuments to First Nations pasts, presents and futures. Short stories are a specific type of writing that require precision of language and the right mix of narrative elements. A good short story will have been laboured over by the writer and is a gift to the reader.