

# *Fire Front: First Nations poetry and power today* edited by Alison Whittaker

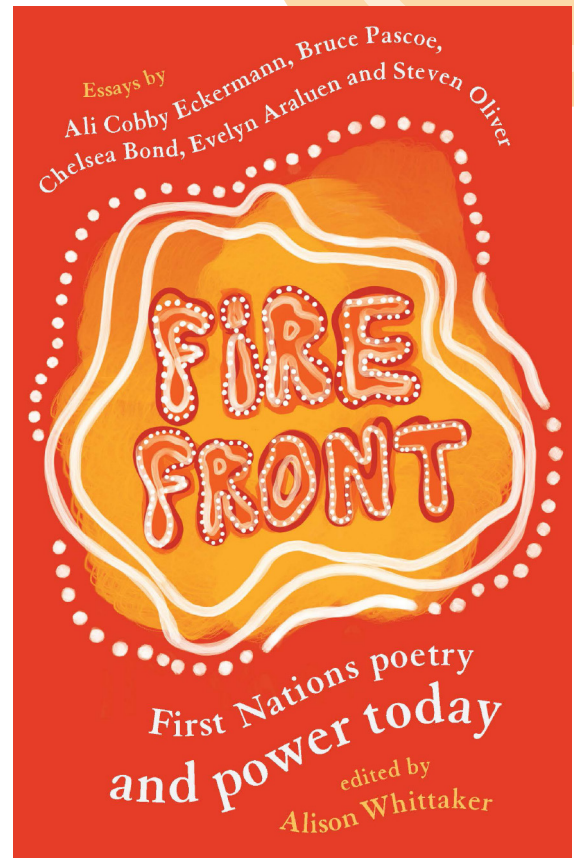
## SYNOPSIS

*Fire Front* is a collection of writing by some of Australia's most prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, performers and commentators. Edited by Gomerioi poet Alison Whittaker, this anthology has been curated very deliberately to explore power. Whittaker introduces the collection as 'fifty-three poems fuelling, making space for, depriving, reshaping, undermining and doing power in every way. What they have in common is why they do it: for the emancipation of First Nations' (p.ix).

Using the fire metaphor to represent such explorations of power reminds the reader not only of the dually destructive/restorative consequences of fire (and power), but of the rightful sovereignty of First Nations people over this land. Whittaker writes: 'It tears through the settlers' plantations, their arrangements of the trees and their form. It takes its restorative heat to the right flora, which release their seeds and bear down hard for the burn. It loosens and enriches nutrients from the top of the ecology. It brings them down to bring other things up' (p.ix). Fire is a natural way in which the Australian continent deals with the invasion of foreign influences while re-asserting the place of those living things which are native to this land.

*Fire Front* represents a minority culture taking the power back using the vehicle of the coloniser: poetry published in English. But the writers in this collection do not simply assimilate: they bring their thousands of years of oral storytelling and songwriting heritage, they add Aboriginal language, and they make the poetic form their own. In the introduction to the second part of this collection, Evelyn Araluen observes that 'None of these poems leave English, or the structures it has projected over our Country, unscathed' (p.44).

Bruce Pascoe wonders whether these poems will be enough to shift thinking and make a difference in Australian society. He believes that Australians are comfortable in their ignorance and asks, 'Will our words be enough to battle the tea-cosy nature of Australian comfort?' (p.74). A worthy question for discussion while reading this collection of poems.



## BOOK DETAILS

B-format paperback | 978 0 7022 6273 9  
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## ABOUT THE EDITOR

Alison Whittaker is a Gomerioi multitasker. She has been a Fulbright scholar at Harvard Law School, where she was named the Dean's Scholar in Race, Gender and Criminal Law, and is currently a Senior Researcher at the Jumbunna Institute. Her debut poetry collection, *Lemons in the Chicken Wire*, was awarded the State Library of Queensland's black&write! Indigenous Writing Fellowship. Her latest book, *BLAKWORK*, was shortlisted in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and won the Queensland Literary Awards Judith Wright Calanthe Award for a Poetry Collection.



## THEMES & STRUCTURE

The poems in this anthology are arranged in five chapters or sections, each with its own introductory essay or narrative, which Whittaker explains represents 'five different kinds of firepower' (p.xi). The first chapter is about family relationships and kinship and the impact of colonisation. This part is entitled 'Ancestor, you are exploding the wheelie bin' and is introduced by Chelsea Bond in a narrative that makes intertextual references to the other works in the section.

The second chapter is introduced by Evelyn Araluen and gathers poems about resistance to the colonisers: 'Despite what Dorothea has said about the sun scorched land'.

The third chapter, introduced by Bruce Pascoe and entitled 'I say rage and dreaming', allows raw emotion and unfettered thoughts to spill out as poets speak back to the range of Australian opinions on Aboriginal cultures and histories.

After the metaphorical firestorm, the fourth chapter reflects on the losses brought about by colonisation and begins to consider ways of healing and moving forward. Introduced by Steven Oliver, 'Because we want it back, need it back, because they can' is a section of poems that consider ways in which colonisation has been managed by the colonised, how cultures have adapted, and the strengths still existing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that can assist in forging a brighter future.

The anthology concludes with the regrowth and regeneration seen after fire. In 'This I would tell you', introduced by Ali Cobby Eckermann, we look back to Oodgeroo and then forward to Baker Boy, and consider how the experiences in between must inform how we move on.

## THEMES COVERED IN THIS COLLECTION INCLUDE:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customs and beliefs:
  - Kinship
  - Community
  - Stories
  - Spirituality
- Racism in Australia
- Impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- Stolen Generation
- Black deaths in custody, youth detention
- Surviving colonisation
- History wars (divided opinion about how to represent Australian history)
- Identity and belonging: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 'Australian' and Settler identities

## STUDY NOTES

It is difficult to study texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors without an understanding of the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which the texts sit. For an overview of cultural and historical contexts with key resource links, see Reading Australia's teacher resource for Ellen van Neerven's *Heat and Light*.



## STUDY NOTES

### *Managing the colonisers*

As well as exploring the range of responses to colonisation, oppression and government control of every aspect of Indigenous lives, many authors in this collection explore how First Nations people have managed their interactions with non-Indigenous people in order to survive.

- Fogarty discusses tourism and the fascination with Aboriginal people as 'curiosities', stating 'they are excursionist on our culture' (p.53). From this standpoint, analyse the poems 'Old Clever Woman' (p.120) and 'The Changing Face of the Jukurrpa' (p.123). Key lines include:
  - 'she knows but not tellin' p.120)
  - 'slow dronin' noise comin' around like one big firefly', 'starin' one – pink face', 'sittin' long – long time / on motor hardly touchin' earth' (p.120), 'click – click – click – click / they just love picture, / no remember – head must be empty' (p.121) – ridiculing the tourists
  - 'This lot take a picture / put 'em in big book. / Tell 'em world they good / they just love Black fella', 'Click – click – same one / gun – camera, same killin' thing' (p.121) – alluding to uncomfortable relationship between black and white Australians.
  - 'No picture – they go lookin' / maybe find big mob, / plenty trouble that one' (p.121), 'She keepin pink demon movin' on' (p.122) – suggesting the woman greeting the tourists is amusing them to keep them from going and causing trouble in her community (e.g. bringing alcohol, rape, disease).
  - 'Jukurrpa still here', 'Many eyes', 'What does it mean?', 'Microphone', 'Cameras flashing', 'Sea of faces', 'Airconditioned room' (pp.124–125) – juxtaposing the Jukurrpa (dreaming stories, religion) with the consumer culture of performance in modern Australia.
- In 'Custodial Seeds' by Yvette Holt (p.133), we follow a pregnant girl who is perhaps following the birthing ritual her elders have taught her, but there is a suggestion that this is ancient women's business being applied to a new situation (liaisons with white colonisers). The final lines of the poem seem to hint about a predatory element in the town where the river is 'dividing neighbours between / economics and class'. Key lines include:
  - 'And so she followed the river / doing as she was told'
  - 'A long wide shimmering snake [reference to Dreamtime] ... dividing neighbours between economics and class'
  - 'Collapsing beside a retired rivergum tree ... resisting the push for life / tasting the sap from a torso of knowledge ... warm odourless liquid rushes between her / legs, cleansing the dirt enriching the soil with a river of yolk' [reference to traditional birthing rituals]



## STUDY NOTES

### *Managing the colonisers (continued)*

- 'Finally her night cries deliver / resonating tears before a disturbing sunrise / the rope of life now rests on her flowing breasts / and again the canine bastards cross the river / digging a bowl for their midnight desire.'
- In 'Cult-charr Jammer' (pp.127–128), Paul Collis strings together the popular images and refrains of urban Aboriginal people yarning about the impact of colonisation, taking the power back from their oppressors and claiming that 'Whitefullas got no Cult-charr!'. The speaker compares their culture to the culture-less 'whitefullas' by stringing together the remembered remnants of traditional histories and culture ('King Billy', 'Queenie', 'Emu in the sky') and asserting a new urban Aboriginal culture ('With my arm fulla tatt's', 'Deadly, un'a? [hey/true/yep]', 'Always was / always will be / ABORIGINAL LAND', 'Blak, proud and deadly').
- In 'Lake Eyre Is Calling: Ankaku for Life' (p.135), Kevin Buzzacott makes a call to arms for Australia to reject all knowledge except that which comes from the earth. Key lines include:
  - 'These are the only things I know; / these sticks, and Old People, and the country'
  - 'Nobody can look after the country better than us'
  - 'We've got the experts; we've got the professors; we've got the scientists'

### *Fire raging*

Some of the more forthright poems in this collection directly challenge Australian narratives designed to neatly deal with our colonial history in a way that absolves the settlers and denies the First Nations experience.

- In 'The Colour of Massacre' (p.17–18), Jeanine Leane summarises Australia's denial of the massacres of Aboriginal people at the hand of colonisers: 'The rest is mere hearsay – oral history – words in the air! Nothing on paper – so who remembers?' (p.18). Leane juxtaposes her discussion of Aboriginal genocide with an outline of the Port Arthur massacre: 'Late in the twentieth century, with a population / of eighteen million the shootings of / thirty-five settlers went down in Australian history / as the Port Arthur massacre prompting a / Prime Minister who denied Black massacres / to buy back the nation's firearms to minimise / the chance of another white one' (p.18). Explore the history of colonial massacres (for example, Hospital Creek, Brewarrinna), Prime Minister John Howard's views on these, and the Port Arthur massacre. While no loss of life should be trivialised and we may agree with Howard's response to the Port Arthur event, what is interesting about these comparisons?
- In 'Got ya' (p.90–91), Kerry Reed Gilbert writes about the moment when a First Nations person finds proof that a person close to them is racist – signifying a betrayal, loss of trust, the death of a



## STUDY NOTES

### *Fire raging (continued)*

relationship. Consider how this might represent a common experience of First Nations people.

- In 'Expert' (p.78), Ellen van Neerven describes the feeling when a non-Indigenous person claims expert knowledge about Indigenous issues based on their relationship with an Indigenous person. In this poem, Ellen depicts her non-Indigenous girlfriend getting drunk and rowdy, shouting about statistics to do with Indigenous people, and eventually being taken into the police station. Key lines include: 'don't know how she's got her expertise / think I'm the first one she's met ... she has the answers because she saw a television ad / for Recognition ... devalues my own knowledge (too urban) ... she likes to argue when she's had a few ... 87% of intimate partner homicides ... involving Indigenous people, are alcohol-related ... won't let her forget this statistic / tonight it's her / in the paddy wagon'. Discuss how this poem uses irony and subverts stereotypes.
- In 'Invasion Day' (p.84), Elizabeth Jarrett uses words normally associated with the discussion of World War One and Two, and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, to describe Australian history. How does it make you feel as a reader to see words like 'terrorism', 'genocide', and 'prisoners of war' used to describe Australian history? Why does the author challenge us to 'forget about ANZAC Day'?
- In 'The Grounding Sentence' (pp.46–48), Samuel Wagan Watson reflects on an incident on Australia Day 2006, where a teenager had been 'driving around with an air gun "looking to shoot an Aboriginal person" on Australia Day' and discusses his relationship to his culture and history in prose, interspersed with lines from the Australian National Anthem. In what ways does this piece challenge our national identity of 'a fair go for all' and 'a multicultural nation'? In what ways does the representation of Aboriginal people as still kept under control, in danger and 'hunted' in 2006 add to our understanding of Elizabeth Jarrett's 'Invasion Day'?

### *Truth telling*

- In his introduction to the third section of this anthology, Bruce Pascoe refers to some of the evidence of Australia having the oldest villages on earth and having 'invented society'. Pascoe has written extensively about this in *Dark Emu* and the children's version *Young Dark Emu*. Why do you think it is difficult for people to accept such information? Why is this information kept out of mainstream consciousness and understanding?
- Archie Roach's famous 'Took the Children Away', referring to the Stolen Generations, is answered by popular rapper Briggs in a collaboration with Yolngu singing-sensation Gurrumul in 'The Children Came Back'. Briggs highlights positive moments in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history post-colonisation. The lyrics of both songs are reproduced in this anthology (pp.23–28). Research some of the positive role models Briggs refers to in his celebration of First Nations peoples' survival.
- Natalie Harkin collects historical records of Aboriginal servants and their treatment by non-Indigenous



## STUDY NOTES

### *Truth telling (continued)*

'bosses' in 'Domestic' (p.20). Harkin includes commentary that such stories 'illuminate a deeply-rooted racist facet of Australian history' and that Aboriginal servants were 'as near to slavery as it is possible to find' (p.20). Alison Whittaker further reflects on this history in her poem 'Many Girls White Linen' (pp.57–58). In what ways does the experience of the Aboriginal domestic servant reveal racism and oppression?

- Identify alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, repetition and personification in Alison Whittaker's 'Many Girls White Linen' (pp.57–58).
- Referring to Aboriginal oral storytelling tradition, Ali Cobby Eckermann notes that 'The campfire is a vessel that holds many of our stories' (p.145). Declan Furber Gillick\* talks about the power in choosing not to publish oral histories, as our stories 'dwell in' our bodies and are meant to be told in the 'tones and cadences' of the person whose experience is being narrated (p.95). In the context of Gillick's piece 'Nanna Emily's Poem (Mt Isa Cemetery 2014)\*' (pp.92–94), discuss why we need to take care of oral histories and be careful how we publish and share them?
- After the firestorm, at the end of the book, we have a poem about a couple settling down for tea and damper by the evening campfire: 'Better Put the Billy On' by Maggie Walsh (pp.165–167). This is a comforting poem that rejoices in the everyday banal rituals of family life, unifying all people. It also shows us that life goes on, and we can find moments of peace, even while we are dealing with trauma and turmoil. In what ways do you think that this poem is one that any Australian could relate to?
- Baker Boy's 'Black Magic' presents an anthem of hope for young Indigenous people. The lyrics are reproduced in this anthology (pp.160–164). Baker Boy has been an ambassador for his people as Young Australian of the Year and comes from a powerful group of nations in Arnhem Land, the Yolngu people. Learn more about Yolngu, the Garma Festival they host, and another famous Yolngu band Yothu Yindi.

## EXTENSION STUDY NOTES

- Editor Alison Whittaker lists a number of other prominent collections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing (p.x). Complete a comparative analysis of one of these publications with *Fire Front*.
- In her introduction to the fifth section of this anthology, Ali Cobby Eckermann observes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories are 'linked by the intergenerational experiences that often repeat without repair' (p.143). Consider how the metaphor of the five types of firepower in the five sections of this book point to the intergenerational experiences of First Nations people.
- Ali Cobby Eckermann suggests that writing is 'cathartic', and poetry is a kind of 'medicine', but



## EXTENSION STUDY NOTES (continued)

it is frustrating that 'None of the issues that have been written about and are of constant concern to Aboriginal people and our families has shifted' (pp.145–146). Conduct further research on one of the following contemporary issues, using the links provided as a starting point. What recommendations can you make about how Australia can make change on this issue?

- 'Behind Enemy Lines\*' (pp.136–139) + 'Justice for Youth' (p.154): these poems look at Aboriginal deaths in custody and youth detention, making reference to the personal experience of Dylan Voller and the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre. (\*explicit language warning)
- 'Took the Children Away' (pp.23–25) and 'Nanna Emily's Poem (Mt Isa Cemetery 2014)\*' (pp.92–95) and the current situation for Indigenous children removed from their families.
- Identity and belonging: 'Yúya Karrabúrra (Fire is Burning)' (pp.29–32) and 'Say My Name' (pp.105–106) and 'Too Little, Too Much' by Evelyn Araluen (p.43: 'Can you cut back some of the language? It trips up the reader and no-one is going to know what you're saying.' "I'd love if you could use some more of language. Is there an Aboriginal word for tree you could use here?"). This topic acknowledges complex identities and how racism is perpetuated through Australian constructions of what is a 'real' Aborigine. This was explored in Australian media during the Anita Heiss vs Andrew Bolt case. Stephen Oliver commented on this topic in an accessible spoken word performance at the 2015 NITV National NAIDOC Awards.
- Evelyn Araluen discusses the tendency of Anglo Australians to control history when she notes how Oodgeroo Noonuccal and her poetry was 'curated and contained, like the municipal gum she so forlornly looked upon' (p.40). Research further the 'history wars' and the debate about the 'black armband view' of history.

**\*Please note:** In the first printed edition of *Fire Front*, Declan Furber Gillick's poem 'Nanna Emily's Poem (Mt Isa Cemetery 2014)' pp.92–95 is missing its very last line. The poem should end: 'You did your best.'

### About the writer of the Teachers' Notes

Cara Shipp is a Wiradjuri/Welsh woman (descending from the Lamb and Shipp families in Central Western NSW) and currently leads Years 7 to 12 at Silkwood School, Mount Nathan, in the Gold Coast hinterland. She has previously run alternative educational programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; held Head Teacher English/HASS/Languages positions; and served as President, Vice President and Editor with the ACT Association for the Teaching of English (ACTATE). Cara has completed a Masters degree in Education focusing on Aboriginal literacy, and regularly presents cultural competence training at local and National conferences, particularly within the context of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the English curriculum. In 2013, Cara was part of the ACARA working party on incorporating the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-curriculum priority into the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.