

Flock: First Nations Stories Then and Now edited by Ellen van Neerven

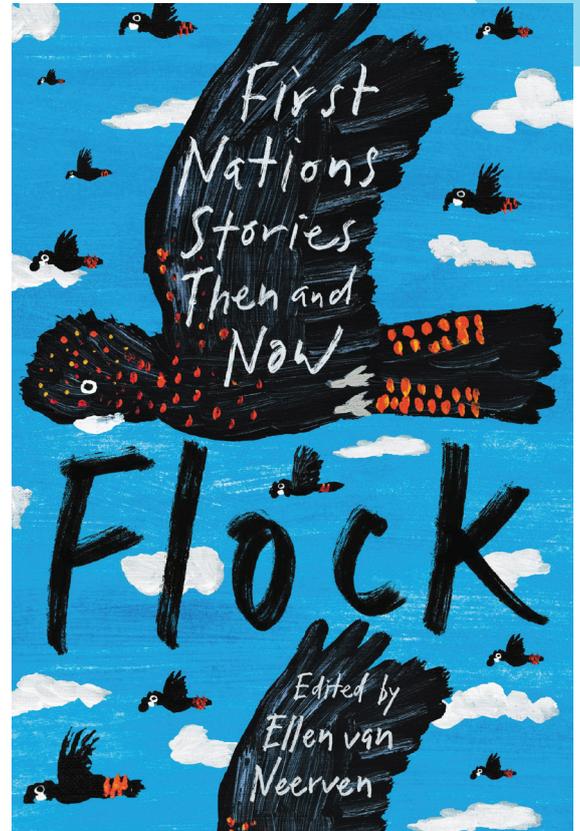
SYNOPSIS

Flock is a collection of previously published short stories by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers from 1996–2021. While celebrating the past twenty-five years of First Nations publishing, Mununjali Yugambah/Dutch editor Ellen van Neerven reminds us of the generations of stories that have preceded, and inspired, these ones. Indeed, this country's First Nations cultures continue thanks to the passing down of stories from the beginning of time.

Van Neerven explains that the title of this collection was chosen, in part, in acknowledgement of an Aboriginal literary giant who departed this world in 2019. Aunty Kerry Reed Gilbert nurtured writers through the First Nations Australian Writers Network (FNAWN), which she co-founded and chaired. Her obituary observed the presence of *kuracca* at her home on the morning she passed (sulphur-crested cockatoo in Wiradjuri language), and likened Aunty Kerry to the sentinel bird because she watched over the mob and nurtured writers across the nation. Van Neerven also observes that birds flock together, and there is strength in numbers, and this collection seeks to promote and further strengthen the diverse voices of First Nations writers.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Ellen van Neerven is an award-winning writer of Mununjali Yugambah (South East Queensland) and Dutch heritage. They write fiction, poetry, plays and non-fiction. Ellen's first book, *Heat and Light*, was the recipient of the David Unaipon Award, the Dobbie Literary Award and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Indigenous Writers Prize. They have written two poetry collections: *Comfort Food*, which was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Kenneth Slessor Prize; and *Throat*, which was shortlisted for the Queensland Literary Awards and the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, and won the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry, the Multicultural NSW Award and Book of the Year in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.



BOOK DETAILS

C-format paperback | 978 0 7022 6273 9
\$29.99

THEMES

Themes covered in this collection include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customs and beliefs:
 - Community
 - Stories
 - Spirituality
 - Connection to country
- Racism in Australia
- Impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, including the impact of the Stolen Generations
- Identity and belonging
- Heritage destruction

THEMES & STRUCTURE

Some stories specifically address historical, social and cultural matters unique to First Nations peoples' lived experience. Some are just well-written short stories without a specifically First Nations perspective. Teachers can therefore select short stories that connect with a particular topic or theme, perhaps within the context of a broader thematic unit, film or novel study. These connecting stories include:

- Exploring land and connection to country, with the notion of 'going home' for healing, particularly when a death occurs:
 - Herb Wharton, 'Waltzing Matilda'
 - Samuel Wagan Watson, 'The Release'
 - Ellen van Neerven, 'Each City'
 - Jared Thomas, 'The Healing Tree'
 - Mykaela Saunders, 'River Story'
 - Bryan Andy, 'Moama'
- Exploring land and connection to country through an observation of a dominant Anglo-Australian culture that is ignorant of this connection at best, and antagonistic at worst:
 - Adam Thompson, 'Honey'
 - Cassie Lynch, 'Split'
- Exploring the lasting impacts of the Stolen Generations:
 - Archie Weller, 'Shadows on the Wall'
 - Alf Taylor, 'Wildflower Girl'
- Exploring common experiences of First Nations peoples' subjugation and abuse by colonisers:
 - Gayle Kennedy, 'The Golden Wedding Anniversary'
 - Archie Weller, 'Shadows on the Wall'
 - Alf Taylor, 'Wildflower Girl'
 - Samuel Wagan Watson, 'The Release'
- Exploring identity, belonging and finding one's place in the world:
 - Michael Torres, 'Rodeo Girl'
 - Jared Thomas, 'The Healing Tree'
 - Melanie Saward, 'Galah'
- Exploring more universal aspects of family life and unhappy or ill-fated relationships, not necessarily culturally specific:
 - Jeanine Leane, 'Forbidden Fruit'
 - SJ Norman, 'Stepmother'
 - Bryan Andy, 'Moama'
 - Jane Harrison, 'Born Still'

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* (<https://readingaustralia.com.au/lesson/heat-and-light/>).

Some key background readings and resources include:

Black Words Historical Events Calendar – a resource outlining key people and events during various stages of colonised Australia, including the Government Protection Acts leading to removal of children for placement in missions and foster homes to be enculturated into Anglo customs (Stolen Generations). (<https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/5962401>)

National Museum of Australia resource – a resource on the Stolen Generations and the Bringing Them Home report. (<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/aborigines-protection-act>)

Importance of land and connection to country – a resource explaining the role of country in First Nations culture, how central it is to wellbeing and what the connection to land means for First Nations people. (<https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/connection-to-country>)

DISCUSSION POINTS

Cassie Lynch, 'Split' (p. 167)

In this story, the parallel history of the Swan River in Perth, Western Australia, is explored – both the ancient Aboriginal creation story as well as the 're-creation' of the river by colonisers, who gave it new banks and used dams to change its flow. We learn of the Ancient river within – the Bilya – created by the serpent Wagyl (p. 170). We also learn of the creation of the land around the river: 'Beneath my feet, deep under Perth, is a scar. Hundreds of millions of years ago, the creator serpent split the billion-year-old crust in two. Half the continent was shorn away, leaving a bubbling sea of molten rock in its wake.' (p. 171).

The narrative around the 'split' country is then extended further when the narrator explains that the settlers now moving around this Ancient landscape are 'carrying with them the atmosphere of their place of origin. Anthropocene Air.' (p. 174). This air is 'a buffer between the minds and bodies of settlers and the Deep Time of Noongar Country' (p. 174).

- Discuss with students how the references to 'split' landscapes, the duality of the new and the old Swan River, and the notion of Anthropocene Air create a sense that we live in a country of parallel worlds.

The story suggests that settlers have inserted themselves into the land but do not fully understand it. They remain blind, immune, to its history and culture. The two populations – First Nations and Settler – live separately in an unofficial apartheid.

- Discuss students' reactions to these ideas, and to what extent they agree or disagree. Are there counterexamples of European and First Nations communities integrating together and sharing knowledge and understanding?

At the beginning of the story, the river – snaking through the city like a serpent – is introduced when the narrator is standing in the central business district, watching the hustle and bustle of afternoon trade. The following scene unfolds: 'A tiger snake emerges from a storm drain and swims across the surface of the water. A scooter drives right through its body as the striped serpent makes its way towards a clump of bulrushes. The snake's waving swim is undisturbed. It disappears into the fringe of green.' (pp. 169–70).

- Discuss with students the power of this image and how it may serve as a metaphor framing the notion of the 'split' country. What are the semiotics around the snake and the scooter – what do each signify in this story of colonised and coloniser? Why does the author choose to focus on this at the beginning of the story? What does the scene say about the continuation of First Nations culture in spite of impacts of colonisation?

Adam Thompson, 'Honey' (p. 75)

Sharkey tries to take advantage of his friendship with Nathan by asking Nathan for the Aboriginal word for honey because he believes that will make his business popular. In complete hypocrisy and flagrant disregard for his 'friend' he then brags about being part of the desecration of significant Aboriginal artefacts such as stone tools found on his family's property. Nathan is trapped in the ute with Sharkey, listening to this story of cultural desecration, and his response is to hold his beanie with the Aboriginal flag, stare down at it, avoid eye contact with Sharkey and stay quiet. The only detail giving away his anger is that his hands are trembling (p. 83).

- Discuss with students why Nathan doesn't feel confident to respond to Sharkey in this moment. Consider why Sharkey is sharing this story that he knows will offend Nathan while at the same time relying on Nathan to help him with the bee hives and supply him with the Aboriginal word for honey for his business – is this a deliberate show of Sharkey's 'power' over Nathan as an Aboriginal man, or is Sharkey unaware of his hypocrisy? Is this a true friendship?

Samuel Wagan Watson, 'The Release' (p. 37)

- Discuss some of the descriptive language that creates a generally sad, nostalgic mood:

'The people out here had a gentle way as they moved. Arthritic hate. A bent neck that eased an arch at strangers.' (p. 40).

'There was nothing Danny wanted to say anyway. Some of the bricks had fallen down from the childhood bond the men had built together.' (p. 40).

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'Bull earned a cracked pelvis on the rodeo circuit ... Then the broken cowboy consumed painkillers to chase the hurt. Alcohol ... heroin ... Chapters in custodial detention.' (p. 40).

'Danny thought about his fading passenger, the pile of belongings in the car that were his only worldly possessions. Methadone. Demons.' (p. 42).

- At the end of the story, Danny scatters Bull's ashes over his home country. At what point does the reader realise that Bull is no longer alive? What is the effect of presenting an opening scene to the reader where it appears Danny and Bull are driving together and talking?

The story hints at some of the common aspects of First Nations peoples' lives as colonised and subjugated people:

'The constabulary weren't even lurking. A Blackfulla driving a new, registered and reliable vehicle could warrant a mandatory search among this "small-town" silt.' (p. 41).

'Bull's mother had seen the burial of too many Wakka Wakka kindred laid to rest in the Mission cemetery of scarred-red earth studded in white identical wooden crosses. The days of mourning and misery, misery and mourning, wave upon wave of Sorry business, no justice and no reckoning for the innocent and the wretched.' (p. 43)

- Discuss with students the concepts of police harassment and brutality and unjust death as hinted at here. Resources include:
 - Dylan Voller and the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre (<https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/australias-shame-promo/7649462>) and (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-25/four-corners-evidence-of-kids-tear-gas-in-don-dale-prison/7656128>)
 - Deaths in custody, systemic racism and over-policing of First Nations people (<https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/deaths-in-custody>)
 - The impact of racism on Aboriginal health (<https://nacchocommunique.com/tag/aboriginal-health-and-racism/>)

Ellen van Neerven, 'Each City' (p. 45)

In this story, the narrator, an Aboriginal hip hop artist and activist, is suddenly ripped from her home and partner as she flees the country for fear of political persecution. The dramatic nature of her high-risk existence is juxtaposed with mundane, yet beautiful, memories:

'It isn't what we want to do but I need clean socks. And towels. We have run out of clean towels. Talvan sits on the washing machine as I count how many coins I have left. Enough to wash but not to dry.' (p. 47)

'When people ask about her I try not to say too much as not to bring the pain closer. I miss cooking with her and her toothbrush left next to mine.' (p. 54).

- Discuss with students how simple, yet poignant, these moments are within the story. What do they reinforce about human relationships and love?

The fleeing activist becomes part of a community of people who have all fled their countries to avoid persecution in some form. She talks with them about how in Australia, Queer people are safe: 'Absolutely. Queer families are protected. Eight gender identities are acknowledged. We are very lucky. We do not have to go through the struggles you have to go through. We live in a safe place. It's a great place.' (p. 56).

- Discuss the irony of her explaining how safe her community is in Australia when she has put herself and her family in danger by being an Aboriginal activist. This story is set in the future, around 2030. Discuss with students how they imagine the future of the country to be – is it possible that there will be progress with climate change, gender and sexuality, but still racism and persecution of First Nations people?
- Consider the way in which the story illustrates First Nations' connection to country, as toward the end her ancestors appear and are calling her back (p. 61). In what ways has the Australian Government repeated its mistakes of the past by creating the 'Indigenous Cities' and making people move away from their homes to these new Cities? (Read about past practices of displacement here: Importance of land and connection to country <https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/connection-to-country>)

Mykaela Saunders, 'River Story' (p. 115)

The importance of the river is highlighted in many ways throughout this story:

- in the description of Gracey's river birth (pp. 123–5)
- in Gracey's mum's dreams as she drifts in and out of consciousness on her death bed: going fishing to get some dinner to welcome her daughter home (p. 117); making the campfire and gutting the fish (p. 119)
- Gracey brings river water to her mother every afternoon, wetting her face with it (p. 128)
- Gracey and her family swim in the river after scattering her mother's ashes in the river and saying farewell, (pp. 131–2)
- The river is a healer and a life-giver. Discuss its power and significance to Gracey and Juna.

Archie Weller, 'Shadows on the Wall' (p. 19)

We learn at the end of the story that prison inmates for the night, Spider and Gary, are actually siblings. Spider was removed by child welfare and placed in a foster home before Gary was born. Discuss the differences in their lives and how their personalities have developed. Consider:

- The description of Spider as 'pugnacious', and how at first Spider scared Gary: 'the violence that radiated from him like writhing serpents of smoke frightened the placid youth' (p. 21)

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- The description of Spider's father, and of Spider's mind which 'burned like a fiery furnace' at the knowledge of his father's past (p. 23)
- The description of Gary as a hopeless, but harmless, drunk (p. 24), placid and compliant
- Spider's experience with his foster father's abuse, eventually leading to him stabbing his foster father (p. 31)
- Gary's experience of their mother, who drank to get over the pain of losing her elder child (p. 32)

Discuss with students how the various impacts of being part of the Stolen Generations can affect generations of family members – intergenerational trauma.

Alf Taylor, 'Wildflower Girl' (p. 97)

The story provides an intimate and heart-rending description of a moment when a child is taken by authorities from her mother (pp. 104–5). This is the type of experience retold countless times in family histories, films and literature.

- Discuss with students their responses to this scene, how it makes the reader feel, and what insights it provides into what it would have been like for First Nations' mothers and families who lost children in the Stolen Generations.
- Discuss with students: a National Apology to those affected was delivered in 2008 by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Do you think this is adequate, fair, just, necessary or unnecessary? What is the significance of former Prime Minister John Howard refraining from giving an apology? Do you agree or disagree with his rationale?

Further resources: AIATSIS Stolen Generations (<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/stolen-generations>); NMA Bringing Them Home; NMA National Apology (<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/national-apology>); John Howard's position (https://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary_library/pubs/bn/0708/bringingthemhomereport)

EXTENSION

1. Consider, compare and contrast the treatment of death, loss and grief in the stories 'Wait for Me' by Jasmin McGaughey; 'River Story' by Mykaela Saunders; 'Born Still' by Jane Harrison; and 'Moama' by Bryan Andy.

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.