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THIS ALL COME BACK NOW

Edited by Mykaela Saunders



Teachers' Notes

Written in context with the Australian curriculum
(English) by Cara Shipp, a practising teacher

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SYNOPSIS

This All Come Back Now, edited by Mykaela Saunders, is a groundbreaking collection of short stories by prominent contemporary First Nations authors. It is groundbreaking in that it sits somewhere within and around the speculative fiction genre (a Western literary category), and its decolonisation of the genre is exciting. Saunders explains that these writers are not concerned about staying within ‘spec fiction’ definitions: ‘sometimes extending or subverting them, or else collapsing them into new forms, or discarding their conventions entirely’ (p. 10).

Saunders’s passion for what is perhaps a new genre and her extensive research are on show in her ‘Overture’ introducing the anthology. This introduction provides teachers with a clear framework for studying the stories within an English classroom. She discusses how traditional spec fiction publishers have been hostile to First Nations writers while at the same time ‘mining our cultures and pillaging our spirituality to trade in tired themes and tropes’ (p. 7). She questions non-Indigenous writers in the spec fiction genre who attempt to represent Indigenous characters but instead end up ‘infantilising or fetishising or assimilating or demonising us’ (p. 7).

This All Come Back Now, with its Aboriginal English title taken from Evelyn Araluen’s story, ‘Muyum, a Transgression’, is a powerful step in First Nations authors taking back control of the genre’s treatment of First Nations themes and tropes. As Saunders points out, spec fiction is a natural space for First Nations writers to play in. Shapeshifting, timeshifting, ghosts, demons, magic, the environment, climate, natural sciences, apocalypse, war and invasion are all ‘devices that our cultural stories have dealt in for millennia’ (p. 8). The key difference is that these stories are not fantasy for First Nations communities: they are cultural beliefs and lived experience. In fact, themes such as war and invasion are the current reality for First Nations people: ‘we are post-apocalyptic and not yet post-colonial, so all those violent histories of invasion and colonisation must be read as apocalyptic by any standard’ (p. 9). Further, Saunders points out that ‘all stories that take place in unceded lands post-1788 are climate fictions’ (p. 9).

Saunders dedicates the collection ‘For weird mob everywhere and everywhen’, alluding to a cultural concept of experiencing all times – past, present, future – at once, in a circular rather than linear manner, with everyone connected through complex webs of kinship and lore that weave across the continent. It is this same interconnectedness that applies to First Nations spec fiction: cultural stories of magic and the supernatural passed down across millennia, colliding with the colonial apocalypse of the present and leading us towards certain climate disaster in the future, always with the dream of reclaiming sovereignty over our country and returning to cultural practices that work in harmony with the land rather than fighting it.

Some of the stories connect through a common trope, event or setting. Saunders has attempted to arrange the stories so that each is ‘in conversation with its neighbours’

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(p. 15). Teachers can therefore select short stories that connect with a particular topic or theme, perhaps within the context of a broader novel study. Some include:

- Statements about the colonial impact on the land and people (Evelyn Araluen's 'Muyum, a Transgression' and Karen Wyld's 'Clatter Tongue')
- Father-son relationships (Samuel Wagan Watson's 'Closing Time' and Kalem Murray's 'In His Father's Footsteps' – contrasting each other with urban and rural landscapes)
- Lisa Fuller's 'Myth This!' works well with Kalem Murray's 'In His Father's Footsteps' as a family story – this time with the mother as protagonist – that also has an element of 'bush horror'.
- Jasmin McGaughey's 'Jacaranda Street' is an urban ghost story that could be paired with Samuel Wagan Watson's 'Closing Time'.
- Satire and cynicism in searing parodies of corporate and government machines and their clumsy attempts to work with First Nations people are found in John Morrissey's 'Five Minutes', Merryana Salem's 'When From', Alison Whittaker's 'The Centre' and Timmah Ball's 'An Invitation'.
- Futuristic and post-apocalyptic worlds are created vividly in Ellen van Neerven's 'Water', Mykaela Saunders's 'Terranora', Archie Weller's 'The Purple Plains', Jack Latimore's 'Old Uncle Sir', Alexis Wright's 'Dust Cycle', Krystal Hurst's 'Lake Mindi', Hannah Donnelly's 'After the End of Their World' and Kathryn Gledhill-Tucker's 'Protocols of Transference'. Most of these stories include a climate fiction element, such as life after all the water resources on earth are used up or contaminated in 'Lake Mindi' and 'After the End of Their World'.

There are many more connections and throughlines in this anthology described by Saunders in her excellent 'Overture' (pp. 15–20).

THEMES AND STRUCTURE

Themes covered in this collection (Saunders, p. 14) include:

- Family
- Old People (Elders) and ancestors
- Government intervention in First Nations people's lives
- Corporate greed
- Destruction of land and water
- Technology
- Language

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- Law
- Ghosts and hauntings
- Belonging
- Alienation
- Reclaiming of sovereignty
- Timelessness of cultures and traditions (such that they can be revived and relearned in the process of decolonisation)

The stories vary in structure from stand-alone short stories or extracts from novellas and novels. The extracted pieces are:

- Ellen van Neerven's 'Water', from their novella of the same name in their collection *Heat and Light*.
- Archie Weller's 'The Purple Plains' from his novel *Land of the Golden Clouds*.
- Sam Watson Snr's 'The Kadaitcha Sung' from his novel of the same title.
- Alexis Wright's 'Dust Cycle' from her novel *The Swan Book*.

STUDY NOTES

Background reading

Some key background readings and resources about First Nations cultural and historical standpoints include:

- Any 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).
- The *Bringing Them Home* report, from the [National Museum of Australia](https://www.nma.gov.au/indigenous/bringing-them-home).
- The Common Ground [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.
- Reading Australia's teacher resource for [Ellen van Neerven's *Heat and Light*](#), which provides an overview of cultural and historical contexts with key links.

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*Discussion points***‘Myth This!’ by Lisa Fuller**

This is a bush horror story in which an Aboriginal mum, Dina (or Di), takes her kids camping while Dad is off at the mines for work. The kids have been so sad about their dad leaving that Di ‘had decided they needed this time with Country’ (p. 82) and they sit around the fire storytelling. ‘With the night stars above, Country holding them, the firelight before them, it is magic. Home.’ (p. 82).

But Di has protected her kids from the scary stories passed down for generations, preferring to shelter them from discomfort. This sees the kids stumbling into forbidden territory. ‘I told ya not to leave the ironbarks for a reason. Them black lakes are on a few mountains and hills round here. If ya see black water then ya take off, hear me?’ (p. 79). This angers the bush, but luckily Di as a local traditional custodian is able to announce herself and her family connections so that they are left alone. An overly inquisitive group of university students exploring the area, who dismiss her warnings as ‘myths and legends’, are not so fortunate. Their screams of terror are heard during the night and Dina knows the beast lurking at the top of the mountain has killed them. Her children, particularly her eldest, Alira, learn a powerful lesson about respecting the land and heeding the warnings of their elders.

Topics to discuss

- Discuss with students the ways in which Fuller builds suspense throughout the story. Consider common writing techniques used to build suspense:
 - withholding information, or not showing the full picture, to create uncertainty
 - foreshadowing and creating a sense of foreboding (the reader knows something is about to happen but isn’t sure what)
 - creating a pressure-filled situation, with a challenge, time-sensitivity or element of risk
 - using the setting as a character, and employing detailed descriptive language to create atmosphere

Have students collect key quotes and map the points when suspense is building.

- While Di demonstrates her strong connection to Country, her husband somewhat paradoxically works in the mines. This is not an uncommon conundrum, with mining companies seeking to present themselves as ‘working in partnership’ with First Nations communities through targeted employment campaigns, Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), charity or giving back to communities. Students can research mining companies, read their RAP statements and in some cases view statements by Aboriginal employees (see this example from [BHP](#)). Is this tokenistic? Why do these initiatives gain support?

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- An important feature of suspense is strong characterisation that makes the reader empathise and worry for the characters. Discuss this with reference to Dina's children – Alira, the classic sullen teen; Brianna, the peacemaker and people watcher; and Tommy, the cautious baby, innocent and naïvely hopeful.
- Di faces the unknown beast and announces herself to it as kin connected to this country: 'this being, that whitefullas long ago made into fable, stolen for their own selfish reasons, spat on as nothing more than myth and legend.' (p. 86). Discuss how this represents the different approaches and relationships to land – Aboriginal respect of the land and awareness of its rules vs white settler 'ownership' and conquering of the land, which dismisses Aboriginal knowledge.

'An Invitation' by Timmah Ball

In a dystopian world where buildings disappear, taking their history, architecture and function with them, Nell enjoys long periods 'off-grid' out on country, enjoying dense rainforests and pristine waters. She reflects on the era before the buildings disappeared, recalling with searing critique and disarmingly accurate parody the 'knowledge economy' of architects, artists, planners and experts with social and environmental enterprises that serve to 'absolve their complicity in the destruction of the earth' (p. 197). She remembers the thirst of these experts for Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous input and collaboration in often tokenistic ways under the 'framework of access and inclusivity' (p. 197), while they would seek to alleviate the continued oppression and destruction of Indigenous communities 'by promoting allyship with marginalised communities' (p. 196).

Topics to discuss

- Discuss with students the many incongruities and hypocrisies in modern culture that Ball comments on in this story:
 - queer and gender equality
 - Blak knowledge economy
 - destruction of land by built environment and how sick it makes people despite the feeling of 'progress'

Have students select key quotes to illustrate Ball's commentary on the above topics.

Ball's piece would work well as a stimulus piece for an analytical essay response on the above issues.

'Your Own Aborigine' by Adam Thompson

In this imagined future, the government has mandated that every taxpayer in Australia is allocated an Aboriginal welfare recipient to whom their taxes are sent, so they know

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exactly where their money is going. Tradies sit in a pub comparing notes on their allocated recipient, having received a profile in the same vein as World Vision child sponsorship. This darkly funny story highlights the ‘white saviour’ and protectionist attitude of governments that still maintain control over Aboriginal people, land and resources.

Topics to discuss

- Compare each character’s approach and attitude. Which character do students align with? Can they understand each point of view?
- Extend students’ thinking on the topic of government control/protection/intervention in Aboriginal lives: consider the [voluntary cashless debit card](#) of QLD and WA, and the mandatory [basics card](#) of NT.

For more about Adam Thompson’s short story collection, *Born Into This*, see [The Guardian’s review](#) and UQP’s [teachers’ notes](#).

‘Water’ by Ellen van Neerven

This novella imagines a future Australia where Aboriginal rights have advanced in certain ways: racial violations lead to imprisonment, social media is banned, Aboriginal spirituality is the most popular religion, Australia has become a republic, a Jessica Mauboy song is the national anthem, and the country has a new flag incorporating the Aboriginal flag. However, with Aboriginal art becoming heavily commodified there is a new industry of ‘slaves’ in art galleries, and the children of artists are ‘enlisted’ to follow in their footsteps. The new prime minister’s misguided idea is to return sovereignty and land ownership to Aboriginal people by creating a new island called ‘Australia 2’ for Aboriginal people, by application only. And there is the matter of the ‘plantpeople’: a newly discovered hybrid race with links to Aboriginal ancestry. This is the latest group to be dehumanised and controlled by the government.

Kaden is the daughter of a famous Aboriginal artist who killed himself due to the pressure of his fame. She takes a government job delivering rations to the plantpeople, and has an illicit affair with Larapinta, one of the leaders of the plantpeople. She learns that her family ancestry connects with the plantpeople’s and ultimately agrees to go underground to sabotage the government’s operations.

Topics to discuss

- Discuss with students how the story may change if told from Larapinta’s point of view. Is Kaden initially complicit with the government? Does she have a ‘coloniser’ attitude towards Larapinta?

For further ideas about how to support students to consider point of view, see the synthesising task at the end of this section in [Reading Australia’s Heat and Light](#)

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resource. This task challenges students to rewrite a section of ‘Water’ from Larapinta’s viewpoint.

Opportunities for students’ creative responses

Many of the stories in this collection do not fully explain the backstory to their future worlds, or leave the reader guessing in open and unresolved endings. As Weller writes in ‘The Purple Plains’: ‘For part of the skill of a good storyteller was to make a story humorous and then leave the message to be chewed over by the listener as he lay thinking at night’ (p. 271).

In the context of this collection, loose ends offer opportunities for students to write their own creative responses, whether filling in gaps in an epilogue or prologue, or taking a tangent into their own completely original writing.

Key stories that would suit this task include:

- ‘Terranora’
- ‘When From’
- ‘The Kadaitcha Sung’
- ‘An Invitation’
- ‘The Centre’
- ‘Closing Time’
- ‘Muyum, a Transgression’

EXTENSION

1. Students can explore the genre of ‘First Nations Speculative Fiction’, starting with Ambelin Kwaymullina’s [‘Edges, Centre and Futures: Reflections on being an Indigenous speculative fiction writer’](#) and her [‘Reflecting on Indigenous Worlds, Indigenous Futurisms and Artificial Intelligence’](#)
2. Students can read First Nations speculative fiction novels such as Ambelin Kwaymullina’s *The Tribe* series. See a list of other novels and comparison multimodal texts in the section ‘A note about First Nations writers in speculative fiction’ in the State Library of Queensland’s [Sovereign Stories Education Resource](#).
3. Students can search for stories by non-Indigenous authors using cultural themes and compare selected stories in this anthology to those stories. Have them consider Saunders’s argument that traditionally spec fiction publishers have been hostile to First Nations writers while at the same time ‘mining our cultures and pillaging our spirituality to trade in tired themes and tropes’ (p. 7).

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4. Saunders suggests that there is a proliferation of ‘un-Australian futurism anthologies’ in the current literary landscape (p. 5). Students can explore other anthologies, such as *After Australia*, edited by Michael Mohammed Ahmad.

About the Editor: Mykaela Saunders

Mykaela Saunders is a Koori writer, teacher and community researcher. Of Dharug and Lebanese descent, and working-class and queer, Mykaela belongs to the Tweed Goori community. Mykaela has worked in Aboriginal education since 2003, and at the tertiary level since 2012. Her research explores trans-generational trauma and healing in her community. Mykaela’s work has won the *ABR* Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, the National Indigenous Story Award, the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Indigenous Poetry Prize, the Grace Marion Wilson Emerging Writers Prize for creative non-fiction and the University of Sydney’s Sister Alison Bush Graduate Medal for Indigenous research. Mykaela is working on two short story collections and a novel, *Last Rites of Spring*, which was shortlisted for the David Unaipon Award in 2020. More information can be found at mykaelasaunders.com.

About Cara Shipp

Cara Shipp is a Wiradjuri/Welsh woman (descending from the Lamb and Shipp families in Central Western NSW) and is Head of Senior Campus 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.