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A writer for the tropics

There's Gold in Far North Queensland

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The rush is on for the literary gold of far north Queensland. This year's Tropical Writers Festival, 12-14 August, will gather storytellers from near and far. Local writers Caroline de Costa, Robbi Neal, and Kay Crabbe were published in the past year with Margaret River Press, HarperCollins, and A&U respectively. Their books are different — a crime novel; a memoir of sorts; and a historical fiction for 9-13 year olds — but what unites them is a depiction of the entanglement of cultures that affects relationships and the distribution of power in Cape York.

Caroline de Costa is the author of the crime novel *Double Madness*. By day she works as Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at James Cook University. Her career in medicine means that her descriptions of a corpse and the process of forensic pathology are grounded in scientific truth. And de Costa cannot help but educate as she entertains. Amid the isolation and beauty of Davies Creek National Park, she investigates 'dripping eye sockets,' the 'gaping rictus' of an open mouth, and a 'horribly sweet smell'. This becomes a layperson's lesson on adipocere, saponification, putrefaction, and hydrolysis. And it gives her fiction plausibility.

In *Double Madness* — a story of hidden motives and plenty of action — de Costa never lessens the pace. Along the way she reveals a deep understanding of humanity and the factors that can lead a person to becoming a victim or a perpetrator of crime — or both. De Costa has always been a staunch advocate for women, and has maintained a particular interest in the reproductive health of Indigenous and immigrant women. It therefore comes as no surprise that her protagonist in *Double Madness* is a strong, intelligent Aboriginal woman. Policewoman Cass Diamond with her gun and an ability to overpower thugs outshines an array of flawed characters in the forms of male doctors. Even the murder victim was, in life, a powerful woman. This is de Costa's way of overturning traditional notions of power and status. In de Costa's world, now is a great time to be an Indigenous woman.

But of course there are men and women who reside far from positions of power and privilege, who cannot solve their own problems or always act as positive role models

due to the abject circumstances into which they were born. This is where Robbi Neal's book *After Before Time* has phenomenal impact. Neal lived for seven years in a remote Aboriginal community of Cape York. There she crafted a book through which the elders of the community could tell stories to a wider audience. Collectively the elders described life before and during the establishment of a mission, the rounding up and relocation of people, and the loss of lives due to violence, alcohol, and illness. As individuals, these elders dealt with non-Indigenous people for most of their lives—constantly defining their place and asserting their ownership of country. So when Neal provided an opportunity for them to teach people from outside the community about their history, from *their* perspectives, they took it.

After Before Time delivers a powerful insight into a community with a traumatic past and present. Historians like Timothy Bottoms have documented massacres, abuse and neglect of Aboriginal people. Add to this legacy the current deficiencies of government policies on welfare and child protection and their predicament is dire. In *After Before Time*, readers learn of a child taken from her family without explanation. Neal's inclusion of that story adds to a growing national awareness of how actions in the name of child protection can hurt Indigenous children to a greater degree than other children due to the simultaneous separation from community and culture.

Andrew Jackomos, the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, recently explained the core of this issue on ABC Radio (*The Extra Mile*, Background Briefing, 12 July 2016). Evidently stolen generations are still being made. But Neal gives us more than this. She adds a fictional account to the elders' yarns and through this voice sheds light on the reasons why many people with good intentions often fail to bring about positive change in remote communities. This voice captures the breakwater of cultural conflict in a community that urgently needs communication and understanding. Readers of *After Before Time* who take the time to reflect on their own reactions, and who respect the challenges faced by the elders, the community, and the writer will be richly rewarded.

Step back to 1898 and head further north to the Torres Strait Islands. Here Kay Crabbe brings to life the pearl-shell industry and the exploitation of crews and divers of Torres Strait Island, Malay, Aboriginal and Filipino ancestry. *The Pearl-shell Diver* is an historical fiction written for children aged 9-13, but the story will be useful to readers of any age. Crabbe follows in the footsteps of Thomas Keneally whose book *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* was a part of school curricula for many years. *The Pearl-shell Diver* is likewise best viewed as one of a range of educational resources available to teachers of the history of the Torres Strait Islands.

Respectfully, Crabbe places a Torres Strait Islander at the forefront of her story. This decision came after spending 26 years helping primary school students to read. Indigenous students often asked her where to find books about themselves, instead of the stories of white kids in southern landscapes. It was the requests of these children

that lured her into the difficult task of sifting through a complex history and making it accessible to young readers. This book presents a mix of cultures. A Japanese reader told me she was at first angry at how the Japanese character was portrayed, but she also said that the reasons Crabbe had given for his behaviour were true. This book grants a voice to Torres Strait Islanders in the same way that modern academics do, through the scattered use of Indigenous language and a deeply-held respect. Reading it in this way, *The Pearl-shell Diver* will aid essential conversations in the classroom.

There are also academic works of the far north that explore history and sociality. In 2015, Timothy Bottoms published a 1.8 kg history titled, *Cairns, City of the South Pacific, A History 1770-1995*. This monumental work with virtually every sentence footnoted gives a wider context to the murders and massacres of Aboriginal people that he documented in his 2013 book *Conspiracy of Silence*. By rewriting the history of Cairns, Bottoms provides a just account of the cultural conflict at the base of present-day antagonism.

Rosita Henry's territory is an anthropological view of social conflict. Her 2011 ethnographical study of Kuranda (a small town in the rainforest near Cairns) titled *Performing Place, Practising Memories: Aboriginal Australians, Hippies and the State* reveals how and why Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents worked together, despite their different interests, to challenge commercial development.

One of the Kuranda residents interviewed by Henry was Eve Stafford. She was involved in the establishment of the Kuranda amphitheatre and markets in the late 1970s and went on to become engaged in the arts at a national level. She is now a driving force behind the 2016 Tropical Writers Festival.

Stafford is upfront about her long term plans to make Cairns the home of 'the most prominent regional writers festival in Queensland', and to then engage with the Asia-Pacific through the Cairns international airport. This year's festival features Magda Szubanski, Stan Grant and Craig Munro. But true to Stafford's form, a large part of the program is reserved for local writers. And with visual artists as storytellers, the Tropical Writers Festival has it all. So join the rush for literary gold, shed your winter woollies, and see you there!

Cairns Tropical Writers Festival, 12-14 August 2016
www.CairnsTropicalWritersFestival.com