

Boori Pryor: Listening with your Eyes, Ears and Heart.

He introduces himself as Monty Pryor; his aboriginal name was only given to him recently by an uncle. Boori means fire and it was the gift of this name that gave him the strength and the determination to continue the legacy of passing on his culture as the family's storyteller. His auto biography co written with Meme McDonald, *Maybe Tomorrow* has been shortlisted in this years Children's book Council list of Books for Older Readers. It explains the circuitous path that lead to this role and it is a must read for people wanting to understand what is like for Aboriginal people in Australia. Pryor's career path has taken him from 'the aboriginal fringe camps of his birth, to the runway, the catwalk, the basketball court, the DJ's console' now to storyteller.

By way of introduction we hear of the tragic death of four members of his immediate family. Pryor explains he is not looking for pity but to set the record straight. "As an Aboriginal family you expect that [the un-timely deaths]. You really do expect that." It should be his Budda Paul as the family's storyteller but now the responsibility lies with him.

The strength to stay focused on his path also comes from his 'mum and dad and from my beautiful godson, Ciara'. Even as a little boy he knew he was Kunggandji on his mothers side from around Cairns in Far North Queensland and on his father's side, Birri-gubba from around Bowen and Townsville.

Boori Pryor arrives at the St Kilda Library to perform for some local school children in celebration of the We Iri We Homeborn, 1999 Indigenous Arts Festival: He changes from jeans and polo shirt into his 'judda jah - my little red undies- and nothing else except ...paint.' The paint; ochre from the earth is 'my shield or my plate of armour.....my link to the strength from the past.'

This is a brave move, (in his book he recounts that adolescent girls are the most intimidating audience), but he instantly has the children captivated. He explains what each pattern represents, the wings of a bird are painted on his arms, on his legs the butterfly and here, the rainbow snake.

Stories and dances are mixed with tribal lore, culture and humour. He invites children to listen with their eyes, ears and heart. He explains that aboriginal children are taught respect for their elders from an early age. They never ask 'why' or say that they 'want' something and they must never speak when their elders are. Aboriginal culture was 'intense, it was very strict and it was very strong', that is why it has continued for so long. Respect for the land and all living things were intrinsic to aboriginal survival. The white man has been here for little over two hundred years but my people have lived here for over fifty thousand years. In the book he tells about a friend who as a history teacher puts the whole issue into perspective for his students. He figures that out of a class of thirty, if only one comes to change their attitude it will be worth it. He asks, 'What makes a successful society?' Will cultures that developed through the Industrial Revolution be able to sustain this planet or will we peak and dip straight down like the Romans. David Suzuki, a Canadian environmentalist explains that successful cultures are those that can sustain themselves for a long time. 'Aboriginal Culture survived all the way through the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Middle Ages up until now, Aboriginal Culture is truly successful.

With his first story he does a spirit dance. He stamps the ground, the dust tells the elders he still remembers, the singing means he is searching to bring the spirit down to help tell the story. It was his cousin Joe Gaia and his brother Paul that were the real dances, singers and 'didge' players in the family. But I have had to take over. As Boori himself readily acknowledges his 'main asset in the role I play as storyteller is that I'm not angry.'

And this is certainly true; the painted man in the red 'undies' is patient, kind and very funny. One story he tells the kids has them in fits of laughter when they all slowly get the joke. It is a story from his homeland about how the crocodile got its teeth. To test if the teeth are sharp a man wades into the mangrove swamp and snap his legs are gone. He crawls away to become a mountain, there he stands forever on his stump legs, 'weeing' down the side of the mountain. The white man calls this place 'Freshwater'.

Boori gets tired sometimes, it's hard to 'play the whiteman's game and stay black while your doing it.' He's performed to thousands of children over the years and they're not all as receptive and uncritical as this young St Kilda audience. Up in the Blue Mountains he was performing to a group of Year 11 and 12 students when a student with his arms folded across his chest, angrily made a statement to Boori. The boy said mum told him that aboriginal people are given houses and money but they destroy the houses, walk out, leave them and whinge they get nothing. Boori maintains the anger of this child was almost like a physical punch. Patiently he talked to they boy. Did the boy know where it happened? Of course he didn't. He asked the boy why he was directing his anger at him. Boori is saddened by the level of animosity and the lack of understanding often demonstrated by his youthful audiences but more angry that adults would pass on this mis-information.

Incident after incident is recounted where you begin to feel the alienation encountered by indigenous people of Australia. They were alienated by the history, by themselves and by the older people. It was only after receiving his aboriginal name from his uncle that he started to be inducted with the family stories by his aunt. He is saddened and amazed that the older people had to keep these traditions from his family. Now when he goes home he gets a power surge of the stories for him to preserve and pass on. Sometimes it is a straining responsibility but something he proudly marches forward with.

It is these moments of hope in the book that shine through like the last drop in Pandora's box. The strength of aboriginal people comes through their sense of belonging to each other. Boori and his cousins are working on a language/ cultural centre in his families homelands, in this way they hope to replace all the negative stereotypes of aboriginal people with positive ones.

Boori thinks it should be mandatory for all schools to set aside information and stories about the local tribe so that people come to understand and belong to the land, 'we have the secrets, the stories and all the knowledge you need to love this land.'

Pryor and McDonald have collaborated on another book that has been shortlisted in the younger reader's section of the Children's Book of the Year for 1999. It is called My Girragundji. Girragundji is a Kunggangdji word for green tree frog and the book tells the story of a young boy growing up between two cultures and how his little frog gives him the courage to face his fears.

Boori acknowledges the strength he receives from this collaboration with McDonald, she has helped to craft and shape the stories, 'she kicked my backside when it needed kicking, picked

me up when I almost fell, saw the beauty and strength of my familyand moved some of the dark clouds that have hovered for too long. It is wonderful to think of this groundswell of reconciliation brought about by two artists working together to tell the stories of aboriginal Australia.

It is a measure of the man and his strong convictions that he is so giving to his audience. Before the children from the Primary School have even arrived he is talking to the mothers and children who are also there to watch his performance. A little black child sitting on a white grandma's knees is singled out, he knows that this child will need to develop a strong sense of self. 'Look we got the same kind of hair.'

I notice when children are invited to join in the dancing this little fella is stomping and clapping and totally immersed, while still up next to his Nan.

He finishes with the story of Girragundji and how he used to tease his seven sisters with the little green tree frog. The audience even after an hour of listening are laughing and enthralled, likewise the teachers have let the time slip by. When they finally line up to go at three thirty you know there will be a line of anxious parents waiting for their children. But that night when the children relate the days activities, when they tell of the aboriginal man , his dancing, his painted body and his stories Boori's hope that maybe tomorrow we will be as one has progressed a little further along the road to reconciliation As he say's, 'Maybe tomorrow then in this warm light the earth will be seen her beauty and her power felt her tales of creation heard through story rocks and sacred waters.'