

Pauline McLeod - Aboriginal Stories as Popular Culture.

A childhood story that Pauline McLeod instantly recalls is the tale of Peter and the Wolf. You all know it. Peter is told he must remain in the garden or the wolf will get him. But does he listen to his grandfather? Oh no! The young boy has no fear of the wolf.

But how does an aboriginal woman whose ancestors come from the south coast of New South Wales and the Adelaide area come to have this story prominently in her psyche? Sad to say, Pauline was one of the stolen generation and she heard the story from her adoptive German parents.

Becoming a storyteller set Pauline on the road home to find her aboriginality.

While a teenager her German parents instigated involvement with some aboriginal peoples and their mythology but it was only a small taste. It wasn't until Pauline was 26 that she met her birth parents and the long hard road home began.

On this road home she was to make many discoveries, learn many things and receive advice from a 'Board of Elders' that continue to offer feedback and support on her chosen career.

Pauline remembers the circuitous route to her chosen path. As a young child she was a good little storyteller, 'sometimes getting myself into a lot of trouble and also, getting myself out of a lot of trouble with my stories.' I had inherited a love of story off my adoptive parents; they steeped me in story and encouraged me to be a reader. She recalls being a bit of a loner at school and one of her main ambitions then was to read the entire collection of the Raymond Terrace School's Library.

As a child she loved to entertain people. And as the years went by Pauline began to dabble; -- - singing, writing, performing. When she met her natural family in 1986 these creative outlets were a way to tell people about what had happened to her. But Australia wasn't ready to listen. She continued to be a dabbler, all the time learning about her culture, about how to entertain people, how to stand up in front of audiences and modulate her voice. But Pauline was angry and impatient and wanted to be able to reach people and change attitudes.

Then one day her mother told her a Dreamtime story and Pauline knew that this was the way to educate people.

This story and subsequent stories she heard told her of a people that had lived for thousands and thousands of years in peace and harmony. This choice of career would allow her to reclaim and then proclaim Aboriginal culture. Teach people the important lessons that her people already knew about living in this great southern land.

Pauline had never heard any Dreamtime stories in her days at school and she wanted to change that, she wants all Australian children to have an opportunity to hear the stories. Pauline wants the aboriginal stories to become a part of popular culture, as well known as Red Riding Hood and Cinderella.

'To make the stories and our culture popular, we had to make sure it wasn't a fad - but a long term change within the culture of Australia as a whole - so we began some intensive

research', to find the right stories. Beautiful, magical stories that people would never forget. Stories that were an encapsulation of our cultural beliefs.

Once the stories were located permission was sought from the elders to use them in as many formats as possible and then the telling began in earnest. With passion and respect Pauline took her stories to the people, through television shows such as Preschool, at the Opera House, at schools, festivals, wherever she got the opportunity. They 'called the whole scene Mallawilli - 'sit down' - a Sydney NSW word and she has been telling ever since. Pauline McLeod has learnt much about herself, her people and the art of storytelling since those early days and when asked about her tricks of the trade she laughs and pauses, momentarily at a loss for words. When pressed she replies, 'Believe what you are saying.' 'Tell strong stories.' she adds. 'Find the natural rhythm of the story, its like knowing the music, it helps you find the structure of the story. 'Look at everyone, make sure they all know they're on a shared adventure. Live the story so everyone can share the adventure with you.'

Another point Pauline emphasizes is the need to research and understand the background of your stories. She sees storytelling as a very powerful medium for teaching lessons and passing on cultural values. Without the knowledge behind the stories she believes a storyteller is merely 'a reciter of stories, an entertainer or performer- not a true storyteller.'

Pauline is passionate and eloquent when talking of the storyteller's role. Having a chance later in life to reclaim her birthright has fired her soul with strong convictions. She would like to bring back the 'power, the honour and the role of the storyteller in society.' She sets high standards for herself and fellow storytellers; we have a duty to adhere to an age-old custom where we pass on the stories and lessons from the beginning of time.

Talking to Pauline I found myself continually questioning my own beliefs, my role and motivation behind telling the stories that I do. We both agreed though that one very important aspect of our work was to give children a sense of place, of belonging to the land. This led me to ask Pauline about non-indigenous people telling aboriginal stories. It's a question that has circulated around the Guilds of Australia since their inception twenty years ago. Pauline explains in an article for Telling Tales the NSW Guild's newsletter

"Within our culture there' a number of categories of stories: public stories, sacred stories, sacred secret stories, and men's and women's stories. A woman cannot tell a man's story to a group of men and men cannot tell women's stories - I don't know the men's stories - I only know the female, the public, the women's and sacred stories and stories just for women."

With this element explained Pauline went on to say that she is in the process of writing some of her stories down but only the public stories, these are the ones that the Board of Elders and I are happy to share. We have no problems with oral storytelling but the artistic property of them belongs to us. Our people will make them into popular culture through books, animations, recordings but only our people know the legends that go back to the Dreamtime. We are happy for you to tell some of our Dreamtime stories all we ask is for respect in the telling. We believe that it is important to acknowledge where the story is from. Look to your local area for stories of place, find the history and culture that has gone before.

This led to talk of anthropologist AW Reeds books on aboriginal culture and how outdated they are. Rather than anger at his misappropriation of stories Pauline laughs that he could get things so wrong. He had no perception of the intricacies of the culture and he borrowed

places names and stories from all over Australia. He didn't understand that there were many distinct tribes all around Australia. Now Pauline is going to set the story straight, so to speak, because it her job to collect and classify the NSW stories.

It may seem a long way from Peter and the Wolf, to collecting aboriginal stories of NSW but then again Pauline has come a long way. And even though it may seem a strange analogy I can't help but think of Pauline as that brave little Peter standing at the gate, friend to the animals, looking to the outside world. Grandfather warned her but she couldn't rest until she'd gone out in to the world and caught that wolf by the tail.