

Obituary: Patricia Wrightson (1921–2010): Australian Synthesiser of Settler and Indigenous Lore

Julie Hawkins

The late Patricia Wrightson (1921–2010) made a unique and highly significant contribution to the burgeoning discipline of speculative and deeply folklore-sensitive literature in Australia, notably by utilizing and making the most sensitive use of motifs, figures and characters from the Indigenous Australian traditions. For her nurture had placed her in early contact with the belief heritage of the people of the Northern Rivers and to the west of that region of Northern New South Wales. All of this she combined with motifs, figures and characters from the European Australian literature and from the complex mass of lore of her own family's diverse cultural background. Her speculative creations had a strong influence on our youth literature, including in particular, her *Nargun and the Stars* (1973) and the *Wirrun* series (1977–1981), with the result that she was a figure greatly loved by her numerous readers, her works having already brought inspiration and the sense of new possibilities for the mindsets of younger generations of innumerable creative Australians.

Through her stories, the timeless landscape of our continent was somehow reformed and given a new meaning and dynamic with its Dreamtime spirits evoked as part of a new kind of mythology, inclusive of ancient and modern Australian content. The result was that elements of Indigenous traditions were brought with some prominence into the contemporary perception of the available folklore for the whole nation. These included famously a selection of nature spirits that Wrightson gathered from the ancient landscape and featured in the *Wirrun* novels: the Ninya, green-eyed Ice Men; the Nargun, creatures of rock and somehow come from the land's deepest heart; the wispy Mimi, creative spirits of the Dreamtime, courageous yet fragile fairy-like beings usually found in Arnhem Land; the little grey, bright-eyed Nyols of the rocks, found in tales of the Indigenous nations of Victoria; fearsome, red-eyed Bunyips usually associated with dangerous bodies of water; the great white birds called Yauruks; the many-shaped, surface-dwelling Yabon; the seductive water spirits, and the awesome Powers of the Darkness.

In *The Dark Bright Water* (1978), dark powers, tailed women who are Kooleen's wives, grey Nyols, the singing water spirit

Yunggamurra, and the more familiar Mimi are encountered during the quest of the heroic Wirrun, also known as Ice-Fighter, and his companion Ularra, as they cross the landscape to investigate strange events taking place in separate and distant locations across the continent.

Although some of these spirits appeared in landscapes that were removed from their original localized contexts, their essence was arresting as they collectively- or in a particular region formed an ambience, a 'community' – a cosmology, even - one created out of an intuitive feel for the essence of Dreaming, to which all Wrightson's readers were guided. Such beings had never before been encountered by European / non-Indigenous readers, and they were diverse creatures embodying the elements, resonant alike of the numinous Dreamtime mysteries and incarnations of the spirit of the Australian landscape, expressions of both its brightness and terrifying darkness.

Ancient and formless things of the First Dark, they only rolled about him like smoke and thinned away from the light in his hand. Wirrun was awed. They might be the land's First Thoughts, stored and remembered with the waters of its youth. (*The Dark Bright Water*, 151-152)

Wrightson's stories thus offered the reader a space in which to become aware of the numinous qualities of the ancient land, to feel the sense of mystery that might be evoked by the presence of Dreamtime spirits residing elementally in the natural environment, as they have done since a time beyond human reckoning, giving thereby a mystical quality that is so often conveyed in Wrightson's writing. Thus, this intuition of Indigenous spirits present near the rocks, hovering in the desert, within the trees, the flowers, the vast deep sky, gave a vision of a surrounding world all at once infused with life and significance, a departure from the more usual representation of an earth that exists for the purpose of conveying an interesting backdrop for the drama of human lives. The so often felt sense of post-modern separation from the land could be seen by Wrightson's readers as merely a fearful point of view that story is capable of dissipating, for they were offered the opportunity to interact with an ancient and living world, one grounded in a spacious and ineffable sense of place.

Wrightson's perceptive writing sought to express the essence of the ever-present Dreaming, and to extend 'the boundaries of children's novels'.¹ She endeavoured to create a certain type of interpretive

¹ McVitty, Walter, *Innocence and Experience: Essays on Contemporary Australian Children's Writers* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1981), p. 128.

strategy from her post-modern readers, which involved an experiential, inspired sensibility for which she was ever willing to provide the stimulus. Part of this task and achievement was to present a surrounding landscape that effectively merged existence in the modern era with an awareness of and interaction with the mythic Dreamtime elements she was evoking, bringing so many of these into the present setting. In contrast, other writings and writers had been regarded as relegating Indigenous legendary elements to a long-distant past, rather than hinting at—let alone conveying—the reality of the ever-present Dreaming which affects Aboriginal people's past, present and future.² Her stories also explored the eternal theme of the morally good in battle with evil, and through this task she examined a continuum of shades that lay between these two opposites. The temptations involved in some of her stories were at various times and simplistically considered 'shadowy' Indigenous motifs, as 'far removed from those of conventional Australian bush-holiday stories'.³ Nevertheless they embodied an immediacy that captured / will go on capturing the more sophisticated post-modern imagination.

While she was writing sensitively in a largely unfamiliar genre, one rather like that of Australia's Indigenous women's stories, and yet her work was about personal solidarity, finding one's proper identity, and the building of individual esteem. She wrote, she said, for 'the wholeness and validity of the story', and she regarded her responsive and sympathetic readers as her most informative critics.⁴ She also wrote for the Europeans: 'we who have come late to the land', and who needed to know and understand it.⁵ The similarly sensitive Australian critic, Margaret Dunkle put it well that:

because of her own deep instinctive affinity, her careful research and elegant command of language she is able to show us this other, older Australia, and the 'earth-things and powers and spirits of the land'.⁶

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² Morris, C., 'Literature', in *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History, Society and Culture*, ed. by D. Horton, 2 vols (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994), p. 624.

³ McVitty, Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁴ Wrightson, P., 'Notes by Patricia Wrightson', in McVitty, *op. cit.*, pp. 129 – 130.

⁵ Margaret Dunkle, 'Patricia Wrightson: Writer of Legends', *Overland*, 139 (1995), 16-18, (p. 18).

⁶ Dunkle, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Patricia Wrightson was born in Lismore, New South Wales, in 1921, and lived in the region, then to the west near Bonalbo, and later on the lower reaches of the sprawling North Coast's Lower Clarence. She had lived in Sydney during World War II, and marrying, but, after a short time, returning to Bonalbo with her two children to live and work as a hospital administrator. She had later served as Assistant Editor of *School Magazine* as produced for the state schools (Primary), again in Sydney from 1964 to 1970, another vehicle for finely honing her interpretive and enfranchising spiritual writing. She was to be awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters by Southern Cross University (based in Lismore) in September 2004, for the special relevance her books held for that University and for the 'home' North Coast region of NSW, in which many of her reflective texts were based. As a regional writer who also set her stories in other parts of Australia, she was brilliantly successful when she returned to her roots to write about the area she knew most intimately, and which had shaped her own being and then those of her children.

The *Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (2001) has suggested that Wrightson's success was due to:

the range of her subject matter, her evocation of the Australian countryside, her insight into both rural and urban life, her wise understanding of the human predicament that transcends national and cultural barriers, along with the richness and versatility of her style. Running through Wrightson's work is her respect for the land and its creatures, its invisible forces and the way it shapes life and destiny. The destiny of Wirrun is bound up with the life-force of the land as embodied in its ancient spirits.⁷

After the *Wirrun* trilogy, Wrightson explored some shorter stories for children and then in 1983 wrote the highly acclaimed *A Little Fear*, followed by *Moon-dark* in 1987, *Balyet* in 1989, *The Sugar-gum Tree* in 1992 and *Rattler's Place* in 1997.

Patricia Wrightson died on 15 March, 2010 at the age of 88, having made a *sui generis* contribution to (Australian) children's and adults' literature, one for which she had been recognised by an OBE award in 1977, she having by then firmly enriched Australian speculative fiction. Her commendations and awards from around the world included the Hans Christian Anderson Medal (the 'Nobel Prize' in the children's writing world) in 1986, as the only Australian writer to have achieved this honour. She was shortlisted for the 1983 Guardian Award for *A Little Fear*, and commended for the 1984 Carnegie

⁷ Victor Watson, *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 769.

Medal, winner of the 1984 Observer Teenage Fiction Prize, winner of the 1984 Boston Globe/ Horn Book Award and four times winner of the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award.⁸ These were for *The Crooked Snake* in 1956, *The Nargun and the Stars* in 1974, *The Ice is Coming* in 1978, and *A Little Fear* in 1984.

As Patricia Wrightson herself had written, in her 'Author's Note' for *The Dark Bright Water* (1978),

in stories of my own making, fairy and monster characters were drawn from the folklore of the Australian Aborigines ... All the spirits of this story came from the same source—except for ... the nameless, shapeless shadows I have placed in the deepest underground. It seemed right that at those depths and in that dark something should move that was quite unknown to man.⁹

Patricia Wrightson will long be remembered, and deservedly, for her willingness to step beyond already well-known writing styles and her devotion to exploring new avenues for both Australian Indigenous folklore and Australian speculation. In truth, she was inspired to the integration of all [Australian] human culture with the ancient presences intuited by her nurture to rise up the Earth.

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⁸ Paulsen, S., Entry on 'Patricia Wrightson', in *The MUP Encyclopaedia of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. by Paul Collins, (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998), pp. 186-187.

⁹ Wrightson, P., *Ibid.*, p. 7.