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## **Introduction**

As guest editor of this *Coolabah* issue I will be brief when introducing this monograph on the late, great Indigenous-Australian story teller, author and activist Ruby Langford-Ginibi. The recollections gathered in the following pages should be left to speak for her by themselves. They honour, remember and assess Ruby's contribution to the Indigenous Australian cause and culture over the past decades, a commitment that, as a mother, was first and foremost born out of her own and family's circumstances but, as an Elder, also embedded in her awareness of community and her perception of the racism that continues to permeate settler Australia. Ruby's work and activism speak for themselves, but have also been recognized institutionally, as in her Honorary Doctorate of Letters by the University of Southern Cross, located in Bundjalung country.

The present monographic piece is written by two scholars who knew Ruby very well and shared a wealth of experiences with her. While Janie Conway-Herron met and became close to Ruby through her academic work, Pam Johnston is, as an Indigenous woman descended from the Gomileroi nation, connected to Ruby tribally through her mother, and was her adopted daughter. Janie and Pam have reflected in dialogic style on their relationship with, and perception of Ruby as a socially and politically engaged person, and capture in their exchange the heritage her unique personality and wit have left us. They have made a generous, excellent joint effort at keeping the flame alive of an inspirational Indigenous-Australian, using a narrative style that, appropriately, finds its roots in the oral tradition to forge a worthy homage to an exceptional Bundjalung woman.

**Martin Renes,**  
*Coolabah* Guest Editor.

## **Remembering Ruby**

**Pam Johnston and Janie Conway-Herron**



*Ruby in front of Long Bay Prison Matraville, New South Wales, where her son Nobby spent many years (photo Pam Johnston).*

### **Abstract:**

'Remembering Ruby' is a tribute to Doctor Ruby Langford Ginibi, a remarkable woman and an important Australian writer. Winner of numerous awards for her contribution to literature, as well as to Australian culture, Ruby was an Aboriginal Elder of the Bundjalung nation and a tireless campaigner for the rights of her people.

Ruby's writing is passionate, sincere and heart-felt, as well as extraordinarily funny and articulate. She knew that getting people to listen to her story would be fundamental to naming the hidden history of Indigenous Australia and to changing cultural perceptions in a broader context. As an elder she took on the complex and demanding role of 'edumacation', as she called it, and her representations of life and culture continue to provide important reflections, from an Indigenous perspective, on the effects of ignorance, racism and colonisation in an Australian context. As Aboriginal mother, aunty, teacher and scholar her writing represents a particular Australian experience for a readership of people interested in human rights and equality the world over.

This monograph, in honouring Ruby Langford Ginibi, is the written expression of an ongoing dialogue between the two authors about their experiences living in Australia and the way that Ruby has interconnected with us and influenced our experiences of growing up in an Australian cultural context. It also brings into focus the many ways that Ruby Langford Ginibi's writing has been central to challenging and changing prevailing perspectives on the lives of Indigenous people over the last twenty-five years. An excellent communicator with a wicked sense of humour, Ruby's tireless telling of the truth about the impacts of invasion on

Indigenous people makes her an important cultural ambassador for all Australians. Ruby's totem, the Willy Wagtail, is connected to being a messenger for her people and in writing 'Remembering Ruby' we aim to contribute to keeping her message of hope and resilience alive and, on the anniversary of her passing, to continue to honour her inimitable and eternal spirit.

**Dr Janie Conway-Herron**

Janie Conway-Herron is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing at Southern Cross University, Lismore where she has taught creative writing since 1997. She is passionate about human rights and travels regularly to the Thai/Burma border to run creative writing workshops with Burmese women refugees. She has been published in a number of journals and anthologies and has been editor of three collections of work from creative writing students. Her novel, *Beneath the Grace of Clouds*, was published in July 2010.

**Dr. Pam Johnston**

Dr. Pam Johnston is an established visual artist represented in collections in Australian, United Kingdom, Belgium, Spain, and United States of America. Johnston has lectured in universities in Australia and United Kingdom. Johnston has taught in prisons extensively since 1989. Her teaching areas are those of Indigenous Culture, Visual Arts and Art Therapy. Dr. Johnston obtained her first PhD at the University of Wollongong, in New South Wales, Australia, the first Aboriginal person to do so, and has completed her second PhD through the University of Technology in Sydney, New South Wales. Dr. Pam Johnston sees herself primarily as a practicing professional visual artist with all her other 'hats' as it were, emanating from this central identity.

## Introduction: Pam

Years ago when Ruby and I were visiting up at Cabbage Tree Island in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Aunty Eileen Morgan asked about Janie. I'd talked about going to see her before we left to go back to Sydney. I explained that she was my stepson's mother but when I introduced her I always said, "this is my son's mother". Aunty Eileen Morgan and old Mrs. Kelly said, "In our way she is your sister. So if you just say 'sister' then we know who you are talking about". From then on Janie became my tribal sister. I've been her son's stepmother since he was three years old so we go back a long way. I suppose, unusually, we share many other lives as well. Intellectually, academically and politically our roads have gone along similar paths so we met and talked frequently about things other than the boy. It has been an interesting and challenging journey for both of us. Ruby wove into both of our lives in the late eighties and has been an equal part of us since then, the third leg of that road to firming up and contextualizing understandings about a society that we all wanted to challenge. Ruby was Bundjalung, I am Gomileoi and Janie descendent from Romani people. We all had big lives and our connection was immediate. We became a mighty family of women, each of us an important part of a triangle of love and support. Now that 'woman' family is broken to a degree, Ruby has gone and left us to go to her Dreaming. We are left how we started, Janie and I, with our boy, Tamlin, but also with a burning desire to carry on the legacy that Ruby has lovingly given us. That legacy is intellectual, spiritual, political, and most importantly, emotional. We both loved Ruby dearly and her parting has left a lasting scar on our hearts – another thing we now share. We write of our shared memories and our shared understanding of the meaning of her work. Ruby is not going to be forgotten. Her work is not going to be forgotten. Her two tribal ones left are going to make sure of that.

Ruby Langford, as she was in 1988, not Ginibi then, was first published in *Australian Writing 1988*, which was the Bicentennial issue of *Outrider* (Jurgensen and Adamson, Eds., 1988). Her first book, *Don't Take Your Love To Town*, was going to be published by Penguin later that year. Her excitement at the time is difficult to describe. As much as Ruby dreamt of writing and promised us all that she would "write a book", there was a little bit of "lovely dream" about the statement. Now it was happening. She was going to be a published writer. Robert Adamson, the Australian poet, and his wife Juno Gemes had been spending a bit of time with her and suggested that she write a piece for the upcoming bicentennial publication.

Ruby chose to write about her grandfather Sam Anderson and often talked about him, describing him as an amazingly knowledgeable man with a great intellect and a good heart. He had a way of saying 'com'n, good fullah, com'n,' (Jurgensen & Adamson, 1988, p.42) that was both gentle and encouraging. He was a man who was devoted to his family and his culture and who worked hard for his employers in the Northern Rivers area. He was a renowned cricketer and horseman, respected and valued within his community while regarded as a slave by his employers. He died at about 79 years old, all alone in a drovers hut. This bothered Ruby for many years and she was pleased, as an author now, to remember him in a published form. For Ruby this was a way of not only honoring her Grandfather, but a way of inserting him into history; of ensuring that he would never be forgotten. One could be sure that he would have been supremely forgotten without her writing about him in this book.

When it came to writing a description of her as part of the contributors' list in the back of the book Ruby Langford Ginibi was quite lost as to what to write. She spoke to me about it and I just told her to write what came into her mind about who she was. She wrote:

I am an Australian Aboriginal born on Box Ridge Mission at Coraki on the New South Wales north coast in 1934. Left school in second form, became a clothing machinist, raised 9 children of my own, worked at fencing and bush work burning off and ring barking, lived in tents and tin huts. Also was a Housing Commission tenant for a while, after waiting ten years for a home. Am now a part-time sewing teacher with the Aboriginal Medical Services in Redfern – been there 8 years this year and am now a tenant of Allawah Hostel, Granville. This hostel is the first of its kind in New South Wales – it's for us parents who have raised our kids and don't want to live with them, and want to do our own thing and be independent. I am the grandmother of 18 children and am an Aboriginal achiever at 54 years of age. Penguin is publishing my first book, *Don't Take Your Love To Town*. It will be out in September or October of this year – it's my autobiography (Jurgensen & Adamson, 1988, p.465).

Pleasingly, the editors published her description just as she had written it. I say 'pleasingly' because one of the problems that Ruby Langford Ginibi has had over the years of publishing is that of editing. She wrote quickly and in the same way that she spoke. Her speech hesitations were not so much full stops as a series of commas to catch breath. One subject ran into another in what sounded like a confused outpouring for a minute. Very quickly one realized that her way of speaking offered a number of related headings, which she always pulled together in a meaningful way. This was also the case with her writing. When I read her words, I very much hear her speaking, a great achievement for a writer. That her spoken communication sounded the same as her written words was both illuminating and comforting. What you saw and heard was indeed what you got.

## **Janie**

1988, the year that Ruby's first book *Don't take Your Love to Town* was published, was my final undergraduate year at the University of Technology, Sydney. It was also the year of the bicentenary, a time when it was important to ensure that Indigenous Australian people and their point of view about the invasion of their country was made more visible and so Ruby's first book was launched in the midst of a debate about this so-called celebration of the founding of the country we now call Australia, which was deemed terra nullius (land without people) by the British colonial invaders. The bicentenary was an opportunity for a certain coming of age for Australia in terms of being mature enough to acknowledge that white Australia does have a black history. Ruby's book played an important part in the dialogue that was taking place around the ethical and cultural implications of such a celebration which, for Indigenous people, was more about surviving and the generational consequences of such survival.

I had chosen to write about Aboriginal women's writing for one of my final undergraduate essays at university. My choice of subject matter was a natural pathway in a learning journey

I had been on for many years prior to coming to university via my involvement in Rock Against Racism having been a member of the Australian Women's Theatre group, as well as spending the previous two decades as a musician in a number of bands that focused on women's and Indigenous rights in their songs. I had many wonderful Aboriginal teachers during that time, most of whom are no longer here to guide me and it is with the utmost respect for all of them that I write about Ruby Langford Ginibi, the great 'edumacator', who gave so generously of her knowledge and wisdom and who touched so many people with her humour and her resilience in the face of so much personal tragedy. I have truly been blessed in having her and her family in my life.

When I began researching my undergraduate essay on Aboriginal women's writing I remember wondering whether I'd be able to find enough material and asked my close friend and mentor, Aboriginal activist and poet, Maureen Watson, what she thought. Another great teacher, Maureen just smiled and said, 'if you go looking for them you'll find them'. And of course I did. Women like, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Elsie Roughsey, Glenys Ward, Ida West, Marnie Clare and Eva Johnson had begun paving the way for other Indigenous writers with their stories of growing up black in a predominantly white society. They wrote of their lives and told stories of themselves and of other Aboriginal people. For all of them I would imagine Ida West's reasons for writing her book, *Pride Against Prejudice* (1987), would ring true. She writes: 'We have had Europeans writing about us for years. As a child I remember people writing about us. They called us half-castes they may as well have called us out castes' (1987, p.1).

I kept hearing about an autobiography by a Bundjalung woman, Ruby Langford. *Don't Take Your Love to Town* wasn't out yet, I was told, but it would be soon. I chuckled at the country music reference to the old Kenny Rogers song, the sense of humour it conveyed and the way the title captured some essence of an urban Aboriginal reality while at the same time tilting its cap at the rural/city divide. As it happened Ruby's book didn't come out in time for my essay deadline, but I still went to everything I could about the book. I marveled at the wonderful storyteller that Ruby was, but felt too shy to actually introduce myself to her.

I went to one talk at the Harold Park Hotel in Sydney, a bastion of the Sydney writing scene at the time. Ruby was unwell and unable to come to the event, but her editor spoke in her stead. She talked about the two voices of writer and editor producing the third voice of the book. I was intrigued by what she was saying but also uncomfortable. Was she saying that they wrote the book together or claiming some writing credit? There was a paradox in this. I had read so much about postcolonial voices and the difficulty for a colonised people to write in their own voice when the recognised literary language was often that of the colonising culture. I was well aware of how sensitive an editor had to be when editing to keep the authenticity of the author's voice in the text, especially when working with Indigenous writers. It was important not to edit in terms of dominant cultural, literary expectations. If Indigenous Australians were to truly represent themselves then the language of their culture and the way they spoke or wrote English was an important factor in building an authentic sense of identity. Paul Memmott and Robyn Horsman, editors of Elsie Roughsey's book, *Aboriginal Mother Tells Tales of the Old and New* write in the foreword about having to work against the tendency to over-standardise the language in order to preserve Elsie's 'unique Aboriginal style' while at the same time making sure of an 'easy reading of the text for non Aboriginal people' (cited in Roughsey, 1982, p. ii). Obviously the editing process was an important factor in publishing

Indigenous writing. But at every event that I'd been to Ruby had spoken confidently and strongly about this book being her story. I couldn't imagine that it would contain any other voice but her own. I wrote to Ruby's editor outlining my essay plan and my concerns about the editing process and asked her if I could use her paper from the Harold Park presentation as part of my essay. Generously she sent me a copy of it.

*Reflections of Me*

*What is all my laughter for?*

*Is it to hide the sadness in me*

*or all the sorrow. In my sadness;*

*must I forever feel so alone when I know I am not!*

*Sometimes I feel so alive and loved,*

*and at other times, I'm lost in a wilderness of misery.*

*What is love? Is it meant to be only heartache?*

*Will I ever know? I did once a long time ago.*

*So long, it seems like an eternity (Jacklyn, 2011, p.17).*

## **Pam**

In the poem above, Ruby Langford Ginibi reflects on her private and public faces. In the world she was seen as a 'famous Australian Indigenous author' with all the expectations that went with that. Ruby had also seriously taken on the role of 'edumacation'; of speaking for our people against the injustices that were a daily and unacknowledged wound in her life and in the lives of Indigenous Australians. Through the telling of her own stories, and there were many, she knew she could draw a larger picture that could communicate. Ruby knew that to get people listening was fundamental to a chance to naming a hidden history, that of Indigenous Australians, and also to make it more than a testimony to the moment.

In an article by Janine Little Nyoongah, Ruby describes how laughter is a weapon, her tool, her protection from despair: 'laughter is the only thing we've got left; we've been dispossessed of everything else. It's the thing that elevates us above all else; it's the thing that's kept us going all our lives' (cited in Little Nyoongah, 2002, online). Little Nyoongah also writes of Ruby's use of humour, 'The museum mentality, the quest for enlightenment through acquiring knowledge-as-property, finally falls down when confronted with her humour' (Little Nyoongah, 1998, p.38). It is true, as she says, Ruby's humour and its strategic use are part of the project of mobilizing spirituality, knowledge and education as political agency against readings that envisage only a sadder tale for an Aboriginal woman writing and struggling. As Ruby says, 'Aboriginal humour is our survival mechanism ... if you couldn't laugh you'd spend a lot of time cryin' (cited in Van Toorn, 2002, online).

Laughter, love, and good feelings, were essential to her own survival, and were also essential to her communication and story telling. From her early years storytelling mattered to Ruby in equal proportion to her recognition that things had to change for Indigenous Australians. Ruby did not so much rage in public as gently, lovingly, and inexorably throw out her storytelling web, then softly and firmly draw all the threads back in. Her rage, anger and

sorrow became deeply private; her grief and fear were hidden in a warm smile, a gentle laugh, and the ability to envelope with her very real compassion for all humanity.



*Happy Ruby. A publicity shot that she particularly liked and used often (photo Pam Johnson).*

Another poem that Ruby Langford Ginibi wrote explaining laughter is 'Empty Vessel':

My auntie Nell told me a long time ago, that empty vessels make the most sounds.  
All my life humour is the only thing that's always lifted me, when I'm down and  
nearly out.  
My laughter is what I'm famous for; I was told by a friend that my laughter is  
infectious. I do like to have a good belly laugh.  
Now, all my family's grown and gone their own way, Auntie Nell  
Said, and I realize why I laugh a lot.  
It's mostly because I'm empty inside.  
There's no one any more to make my life full again, like it used to be. Hence, I'm  
empty for me.  
Ha! Ha! Haw! Haw! Haw! Har! Har! AAAghh  
(Jacklyn, 2011, p.19)

Ruby Langford Ginibi wrote as much about her despair and emptiness as she did about humour. She realized quite early on that no one was interested in her despair. It upset them. Humour was easy. She stuck with that. In remembering this aspect of Ruby Langford Ginibi, I'm reminded of a recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald by Jane Cadzow where Noel Pearson was singled out for his leadership qualities and charisma over the last decade or so. Noel Pearson has been in the forefront of institutional discussions in relation to Indigenous welfare and social frameworks for some time and has managed the many contested sites he has had to navigate with a considered approach, a reasonable voice, and status and leadership within his own community. The article speaks of another side of him as if it is a shocking surprise. In Cairns, where a Queensland Government delegation was meeting with Noel Pearson and other Indigenous leaders, opening greetings were cordial as the government delegation waited for Pearson to speak:

What followed, according to former parliamentarian Stephen Robertson, was "a tirade of expletives and abuse", including, more than once, the phrase "f...ing white c...s". Robertson, a minister in the state's then Labor government, sat transfixed,

pinned to his seat, as Pearson excoriated his visitors – "starting very slowly, very deliberately, and speaking quite softly, then over the next 15 or 20 minutes reaching a crescendo".

Among those present was state environment minister Kate Jones, whose female adviser was dismissed by Pearson as an "arse-wipe". Robertson says his own chief-of-staff, an indigenous man, was called a "sell-out c...". Another member of the group sums up the rest of the diatribe: "'You f...ing white c...s', scream, scream, scream. Full on, for half an hour. Nobody could get a word in" (Cadzow, 2012), online).

Is Noel Pearson less credible because he shouts, swears, and loses his temper? It seems that Australia wants that wise and knowing, universally cultured, educated and urbane Noel Pearson, the one that behaves like a 'white' man, not the raging, angry, demanding Noel. In examining this article and applying it to Ruby's life I find the sad fact of the matter is that the answer could be 'yes'. Would she have been listened to, read, sought after, if she showed her rage, her anger, her grief and sorrow, her loneliness and fear? Certainly it would have been a more challenging relationship for her non-Indigenous audience. Laughter, for Ruby Langford Ginibi was as genuine as the morning and everyone was safe inside it. It was also one of her many tools towards being listened to. After the publication of that first book, Ruby was in fear that people would cease to listen to her. Her intelligence, and her understanding of politics allowed her to walk that careful road with honesty and integrity. However, sometimes it was hard.

## **Janie**

Reading *Don't Take Your Love to Town* was a revelation to me, not because I didn't expect that her life would have been so difficult but more because of the details and the very personal and descriptive way it had been written. As a single mother I knew just how hard it had been to bring up just one child and that was with his father being very present and involved in his life and with the help of my own family, particularly my parents, who would babysit their first grandson at every opportunity. But Ruby's stories which she describes in the acknowledgements at the front of *Don't Take Your Love to Town* as being 'a true life story of an Aboriginal woman's struggle to raise a family of nine children in a society divided between black and white culture in Australia' (Langford, 1988) was something else again. A quote from a review in *The Australian* by Billy Marshall-Stoneking and reprinted on the cover of Ruby's second book *Real Deadly* describes the narrative as 'the ultimate battler's tale ... The life Langford has lived in Australia is as close to the eyes and ears as print on the pages makes it'. When Janine Little Nyoongah asks Ruby whether she thinks that the life she has led has all of a sudden transformed itself into this writing, that the reason why she's such a successful writer is because she's such a good story teller, Ruby answers: 'A true story teller! No, the truth. As I said, I'm not interested in fiction. Don't need to be because I'm too busy writing the truth about my people ...' (1994, p.109).

*Don't Take Your Love to Town* opens with a chapter on names and is a synopsis of her early life growing up in Bonalbo where Aboriginal clever man Uncle Ernie Ord took over looking

after her and her sisters after their mother left them when Ruby was nine years old. Uncle Ernie gave Ruby her totem, the Willy Wagtail advising her that she would 'always know if there's trouble because the Willy Wagtail will warn' her (p.1). At the end of this chapter Ruby writes in an intimate voice to the reader 'you can think of me as Ruby, Wagtail Big Noise Anderson Rangi Ando Heifer Andy Langford. How I got to be Ruby Langford. Originally from the Bundjalung people' (1988, p.2). This list of names serves as an introductory map for the many stages of Ruby's life covered in the rest of her autobiography in an intimate voice and humorous tone that I would become very familiar with both in the flesh and on the page in the ensuing years.

I was cognisant of the lives that many of my Aboriginal friends had lived and how different my own life had been growing up white in Australia and I had been on a steep learning curve about these differences for nearly a decade after becoming involved with the two Aboriginal bands, No Fixed Address and Us Mob, featured in the docudrama that had been made about their life as a touring band titled, *Wrong Side of The Road* (1981). Having also worked in Rock Against Racism on Aboriginal deaths in custody before the actual committee was set up, I knew about the stolen children, the prejudice, the over-incarceration of Indigenous people and had been part of early calls for an inquiry. But in Ruby's personal story all the kernels of the situation are given such intimate detail and description that the reader is taken directly into a world that at the time was known by only a relative few non-Indigenous Australians. While the circumstances may have been familiar to me, to read about Ruby's life in such visceral detail gave extra life and body in an individual sense to the stories of Aboriginal Australia. As Edward Hills writes in his PhD thesis on Australian Autobiography:

Langford's story is political because it embodies the social and cultural dilemma of a people caught between two cultures. Because she belongs to the margins, to a suppressed minority, her story assumes the status of a history that is, in spite of its deeply personal tone, politically critical of those mainstream forces that have produced the injustices. Apart from its function as critique of mainstream social forces the book has a political agenda that gestures towards the collective future. The personal dimension – Langford's concern for her family – becomes a platform for reconciliation, which acknowledges the meaning of 1788 without bitterness or resentment (1997, p.147).

## **Pam**

In *The Postcolonial Eye* (2012), the particular focus of the subject matter allows author Alison Ravenscroft to deal with issues of postcolonial theory and race and ethnicity. This focus is seen in Ravenscroft's treatment of the figuring of white desire in Aboriginal fiction, film and life-stories, and in her treatment of contemporary Indigenous cultural practices. Alison Ravenscroft describes 'the postcolonial eye' as referring to the 'eye' and the 'I' inside contemporary Australian race. Ravenscroft describes this focus as being about seeing, where vision is taken to be subjective and shaped by desire, and about knowing one another across the cultural divide between white and Indigenous Australia. The 'voice' of Indigenous writers and the 'ear' of non Indigenous readers is as important in the 'hearing' of the stories as it is in

the initial telling. Ruby once read out a stanza poem 'Burnt Norton' from T.S. Eliot's, *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in the future,  
And time future contained in the past.  
If all time is eternally present. (Eliot, 1959, p.13)

Ruby said that if he'd just dropped the 'perhaps' he'd have got it right, but the 'perhaps' was the most important part, culturally, for T.S. Eliot because that 'perhaps' covered his arse. We laughed because he was white and male and he would do that. The observation Ruby made about how essential that 'perhaps' was to undermining actuality, that is, covering his arse in terms of literary responsibility – better to be more definitive and less waffly in order to assert a definite statement – was Ruby's way of explaining what she meant when she said she didn't write fiction. In her writings one couldn't abstract a life that was so definitively lived. What she wrote and what she talked about was a 'story' she was born to tell, she said. There was no 'once upon a time' about her stories. The start, middle and end of her stories were true. Ruby was the authority. These stories were about the lives of our people, our culture; stories that had never been told before outside Australia's Indigenous community.

Given this observation, it is interesting to note that, despite Ruby's awareness of how the white male culture works, negotiations with, what was for her, a foreign culture, meant her ignorance was exploited on a number of occasions particularly as a result of an assumption, on her part, of equality. An assumption, it must be said, that wasn't clearly shared by a very small number who were engaged in the pre-publishing of that first book, *Don't Take Your Love To Town*. Janine Little Nyoongah writes:

In 1992, Ginibi published her second book, *Real Deadly*, and won a legal battle with her first editor to reclaim full copyright on *Don't Take Your Love To Town*. Ginibi was in the curious position of sharing copyright on this book with her editor, which meant that when she died her book would belong not to her family but to the editor. Being new to the world of literary contacts and editing deals, Ginibi could not imagine how her story would wind up being anyone else's property (Nyoongah, 1998, p.35).

It was apparently very hard for a non-Indigenous person to believe that someone like Ruby, a so-called 'uneducated' Indigenous person, could write a complete book by herself. There were a number of occasions when people did assert to me that she didn't in fact write her own book. These insinuations were devastating to Ruby and devastating to me. It was a shock that non-Indigenous people could act this way. Her words, her stories, were her life, her spirit, her gift to the nation, so far as Ruby was concerned. She was very clear that she was part of the Indigenous community; the one upon whose country she belonged, Bundjalung, and also the bigger Australian Indigenous community. Her story was all Indigenous Australians' story and she was not going to be dispossessed of it. Remembering Indigenous Australian author David Unaipon and how anthropologist William Ramsay Smith stole his work from him she knew how easily she could lose everything she wrote. Having to have this fight only confirmed this view.

## Janie

There are two stories in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* that epitomise the continuing prejudice that existed against all Aboriginal people at the time it was written. They are told in Ruby's inimitable style, one that makes you laugh at the same time as cringe. I have heard Ruby tell this first story many times, accompanied by her distinctive chuckle as she watches her 'ghubba' friends' mouths drop, but this is how she writes about Coraki a town in Bundjalung country, northern NSW, where many of her people still live:

In the main street, which ran parallel to the river, was a baker with a crow in the cage on the counter. When the baker was out the back, the crow called out, 'There's blackfellers in the shop!' Further up the street was the Masonic Hall where we went to the pictures: Hopalong Cassidy, Tom Mix, Charlie Chaplin. Only a few times we went in to the pictures – three miles – the adults piggybacking the kids home after. The pictures had segregated seating, one side for us, the other side for whites. At the hospital they had special wards for Kooris, down the back (1988, p.9).

Much of the narrative of *Don't Take Your Love to Town* is situated outside Sydney in the kind of rural environment that, before I moved to the New South Wales north coast, I had known only at a distance through my own mother's stories of growing up in country New South Wales. My mother also suffered the prejudice of small town talk when her father went broke during the depression and was sent to jail for fraud. She was not enamoured of the country life at all, but even her struggles could not compare with the day-to-day life that Ruby describes where with six children and pregnant with her seventh, after being deserted by her husband Gordon, she took a job fencing and cutting stays for a coal mine with another man, Peter, who was a friend of the husband who had deserted her:

This job meant going through trees and marking the ones we would need, then felling them with axes. Next we had to strip the limbs off and measure each stay which was six feet. We sat opposite each other and sawed through them one by one, hard, sweating, back-breaking work. Every now and then Peter signaled me to stop and he'd go and piss on his hands. It was an old remedy to stop the blisters becoming infected. When the stays were cut we loaded them onto a truck. I had blisters on my hands and we slept like dead at night (p.85)

And

Between Peter and me and the kids marking for us we did three miles of fencing in three weeks. I think it was a record. Sometimes we started when it was still dark and worked by hurricane lamp and the headlights of the car. This was so we could escape the heat of the day and mostly we didn't finish before nightfall (p.90).

And then, after being paid, Ruby goes to the Queensland town of St George.

This town was a mecca of civilisation to me, look, here was a dress shop – I went right in. I needed a new dress. Halfway into the shop I saw myself in a mirror close

up. Here was a pregnant woman with blistered hands like a man's, her face peeling like flaky pastry and black, she started black, but her arms were BLACK and the hair ginger. I stared at myself for a long time and then I bought a sleeveless cotton dress and went outside. I hadn't been in town for so long I was lonely for another woman to talk to, so every woman I passed I said hello, hello, hello just to hear them talk to me (p.93).

Ruby's writing here brings to life a distinctly Australian experience. As many reviews have attested to, Ruby's memoir talks to both black and white readers but some of my friends who read the book were frustrated that Ruby had had so many babies with so little means of support. I knew enough to understand that, while white European-style feminism was calling, quite rightly, for abortion to be every woman's legal right it was also the case that, for many Indigenous women the world over, access to suitable child care was equally important. After atrocious government policies had tried to ensure that white Australia was 'soothing the pillow of dying race' as nineteenth century philosophy would have it, recreating family made childbearing an important part of Indigenous women's lives. My son, Tamlin, is precious to me and many times I have imagined what it would be like to be an Indigenous mother and to have been threatened with having your children taken away from you just because you were Aboriginal. Ruby had three children die and was in constant danger of authorities taking her children away but there was also another danger for Ruby as an Indigenous mother, which I was aware of in a political sense through my involvement with deaths in custody. That was the danger of her children being incarcerated. Ruby's 1999 book, *Haunted By the Past*, focuses on her son Nobby's story and in *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, Ruby also writes about the incarceration of her teenage son after being unfairly charged with shooting at police in June 1983 and his subsequent escape. As a consequence Nobby spent numerous years in and out of jail and was permanently emotionally scarred by his experiences there.

## **Pam**

My mother met Ruby long before I did, somewhere way back in the early '50's. I didn't know that until Ruby told me and my mother was dead by then. Ruby held something of my babyhood in her memory. Ruby was young, wild and free as was my mother when they met. I knew Aileen, Ruby's daughter, from Tempe and also from rescuing her from a crazy man that she'd escaped to the refuge to get away from. That was in the early '80's. Ruby was teaching sewing upstairs at the Aboriginal Medical Centre in Redfern in Sydney. I had brought my youngest son there just after arriving in Sydney and had wandered upstairs to catch up with someone else. She wasn't there but Ruby was. She knew Alma, the person I was looking for, who lived out at Allawah, as did Ruby. We talked, at that time, for quite a while about this and that and she got me sewing with her. She looked after Dance, my youngest at the time, while I went and got hot chips for us. I went out to Allawah and started visiting not only Alma, but Ruby as well. Much later Ruby would get me to do the cover for *Don't Take Your Love To Town*. She described her experience of writing this book to me as causing her to have two near nervous breakdowns as she revisited and lived through much sorry business. What should have been a joy and a relief for her, the completion of this book and publication, turned into another area of sorry business as her copyright was nearly taken from her. Ultimately the copyright was resolved through legal means but Ruby learnt very quickly what

ownership is in the non-Indigenous community. She already knew what ownership meant inside her own community.

I was at art school at the time. Postmodernism was the dominant theoretical discussion, and Roland Barthes's observations in his famous essay, 'Death of the Author' (Barthes, 1977, p.142-148). As an Indigenous student with not much idea of Indigenous culture I was caught up in a theoretical web of confusion. I was being encouraged on one hand, to 'take' Indigenous imagery and use it in my own work as a 'birthright' because of my identity, while, on the other hand I had that inkling of knowledge that said not only is this wrong but both modernity and postmodernism weren't dealing with this issue while Indigenous engagement in this discourse was made difficult by the way that Indigenous culture is structured. Ruby already knew that in Australia, Indigenous heritage comprises all objects, sites and knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. Indigenous people have a living heritage. Their connection with the land, water, animals, plants and other people is an expression of cultural heritage. Writing, music, performing arts, visual arts and media arts are some of the mediums for transmitting Indigenous cultural heritage. As primary guardians and interpreters of their cultures, Indigenous people have well-established protocols for interacting with their cultural material. New situations also require cultural protocols. While works by individual artists are protected by copyright, there are often no legal rights around the broader reproduction and use of Indigenous cultural heritage material. Australia does not yet have a law that prevents alteration, distortion or misuse of traditional symbols, songs, dances, performances or rituals that may be part of the heritage of particular Indigenous language groups. Any discussion about appropriation, then, leaves Indigenous culture highly vulnerable, not just economically, but spiritually and culturally.

I was surrounded by an education and culture that told me I didn't exist outside their construction, while my own reality continued to be written into my life and confirmed every time I looked in the mirror. Ruby became my oasis in a desert of negativity, my intellectual and cultural warrior in a war that took no prisoners. By this time Ruby was at the end of writing *Don't Take Your Love To Town*. I was in my last year at art school and the Bicentennial was everywhere. Indigenous stories were being made to fit into a colonial construction. Was it indeed 'invasion' as Indigenous Australians saw it, or was it 'settlement' as non-Indigenous Australians preferred to see it? This discussion was one of many that indicated the huge divide in perception between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians at that time. It was an argument that I had every day at art school and a discussion I had at least once a week with Ruby. Her knowledge and intelligence were decisive on this matter. She always spoke, loudly and forcefully and from an Indigenous perspective, aware, as she was, that the Indigenous voice was denied on every level in Australia. Ruby, through her books and essays, was already on top of this argument and was voicing her concerns about the different sub-texts.

## **Janie**

Storytelling as a struggle of memory against forgetting articulates the space between the opposition of right and wrong and forces us to look at humanity itself. In 1988 Ruby won the Human rights Literary Award from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

for *Don't Take Your Love to Town* alongside Wiradjuri/Gomileoi activist, playwright and poet Kevin Gilbert's anthology of Aboriginal poetry titled *Inside Black Australia*. Ruby's storytelling is intrinsically tied up with Human Rights for her people and in the 1994 interview with Janine Little Nyoongah, Ruby discusses the importance of Indigenous Australian art and culture in terms of its ongoing contribution to Human Rights saying:

We've got this whole wonderful human resource, our Aboriginality, that this country has never ever used, to promote our stuff, to lift us up, but they've used it to their own advantage, for their own gain, and they've been taking from our culture ever since they colonized this land (Langford cited in Little, 1994, p.104).

Ruby was born on Australia Day 1934, a day that she and other Indigenous people prefer to call Shame Day or Survival Day, indicating a vexed relationship with the day many Australians celebrate as the birth of a nation. In 1988, fifty four years later in the bicentenary year of 1788, a year that is soaked in the ambivalence of nation making and resultant colonisation, Ruby's writing about her life is given the kind of recognition that will lay the foundations of her becoming one of the most significant Australian writers of her time. The book is now distributed globally and is taught in schools and universities across Australia. For me reading *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, back in 1988, marked a real turning point in my life and the beginning of a relationship with a truly visionary woman who knew the importance of the story she had to tell and who had the courage to tell it.

## **Pam**

While preparations for the re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing were being rehearsed, Indigenous Australians had taken the Bicentennial Year in Australia as a way of asserting a simple fact: WE HAVE SURVIVED. Sydney Harbor. Tall Ships. Colonial songs. A convict past. And rum. All these things were being celebrated as a master theme while the Indigenous story of Australia was going to be asserted by us no matter what. If we didn't assert ourselves, no one else was going to! Indigenous survival became the subtext of the Bicentennial Celebrations in Australia in 1988. The big, the official ceremony was going to happen on Australia Day, 26th. Ironically January 26 was Ruby's birthday as well. She always loved the irony of 'Shame Day', Australia Day, and her birthday being on the same day. For weeks prior to 26th January 1988 Indigenous mobs came in from all over Australia. Mostly these visitors were staying out at La Perouse but mobs were also staying at Redfern, at Woolloomooloo and other places in inner Sydney.

As much as we were focused on the 26th January, Lapa (La Perouse) was the centre of all activities leading up to the actual day. As descendants of the traditional people of this land, for many of us exposure to traditional ceremonies, language and culture 24 hours a day for seven days a week was a unique and life-changing experience that we drank to exhaustion. The campfires glittered at La Perouse as far as the eye could see. We all marked our faces and arms, with permission from the elders, with kaolin ochre. Out there at La Perouse, into Redfern, Woolloomooloo, Balmain, and out in the Western suburbs we were one. We had indeed survived.

At Mrs. Macquarie's Chair, near my place in Woolloomooloo, more campfires were lit as the Aboriginal flag was raised and a camp set up. Our presence as Indigenous people was everywhere. Yes indeed. We had survived. Ruby virtually moved into my place as we went up to this campsite at Mrs. Macquarie's Chair on Sydney Harbor. There are many pictures in existence which accidentally and deliberately show Ruby sitting on a chair under the flag.

It was one of the many meetings places at that time for Indigenous people. Ruby and other Elders talked about previous actions. Ruby said that if they don't keep remembering and telling, 'edumacating' (she already used that word way back then) it would all be 'disremembered'. By that she meant that it would be documented by a non-Indigenous person and therefore would be contextualized to a colonial culture whose interest in stories had a completely different perspective. At issue for Ruby, was not only owning our own history and stories through our own voice and our own telling; Ruby felt that a non-Indigenous voice had no business representing or interpreting anything Indigenous. We discussed Barthes's perspectives on the absence of author many times, concluding, for us, that his writings encapsulated another form of genocide – a cultural and spiritual one. Is there such a thing? Well, yes, if culture gives spirituality and both give life. Indigenous culture recognizes through ancestry and therefore culture, an originator in community, an author as community if you like, who must be recognized not through production, but through connection, obligation, and right. This right is necessarily in opposition to a culture that recognizes knowledge as a democratic power; a right as an assertion of equality, whereas in Indigenous culture knowledge is owned and looked after as a sacred obligation and passed on to certain individuals or groups who have a right through very complex kinship lines defined by connection or belonging to very specific ancestry and country. To dishonor or shame these obligations was so awful that the person that this happened to could become empty of spirit, or even dead. That's how we recognize the notion of 'author' Indigenous way. I could dwell on a vast number of events to illustrate Ruby Langford Ginibi's connection to both ancestral culture and contemporary political awareness but the lead up to the Australian Bicentennial celebrations and the actual Australia Day events seemed to me to be the best way to illustrate the place that Indigenous Australians were situated and how Ruby and her writings were placed both inside and outside this huge event.

One could say that it was luck that it was published. If Ruby hadn't had the 'luck' of meeting Billy Marshall Stone King while on a journey to Uluru with her mother the book may not have been published. One could say it was 'luck' that Rosie Creswell, as her agent, convinced Penguin to publish the book. Or maybe it could be said that Australia was ready for such a story. However one chooses to understand the progression towards publication, the real story is so much greater.

Aboriginal Australians have a very long and rich history of storytelling, mostly oral and pictorial. Authors adopt a western mode of storytelling to speak to a non-Indigenous audience, while infusing it with traditional Aboriginal narrative styles. For example, in *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, the language is conversational and colloquial, and the structure is less linear and more fluid (often moving loosely between memories). Ruby Langford Ginibi, born at Box Ridge Mission, Coraki, in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Australia, had a specific life before she entered this world, almost a blueprint. That life was marked with 'no hope' because she was born Aboriginal Australian. Many people since childhood have wanted to be writers, and Ruby was no exception. Things get in the way or

things become impossible. Ruby Langford Ginibi wouldn't even dream of becoming a writer because she was Aboriginal. The stories she had to tell burnt into her heart for over fifty years with nowhere to go beyond an oral tradition that had impassable boundaries to their travelling.

## Janie

I didn't actually meet Ruby until a year or so after 1988 at the launch of an exhibition of Pam's. I remember Ruby's warmth at this occasion and her announcing that Pam was her adopted daughter, having known Pam's mother from their youthful days in Redfern. Later Pam introduced me to Ruby and from then on I became, because of my relationship with Pam, one of her extended family and so I came to know Pauline, Aileen, Jeff and also Nobby. Pam was teaching art in the jails at this time and Nobby was one of her students.

In 1992 Ruby's second book *Real Deadly* was launched. It's a collection of stories and poems and on the cover is a photograph of Ruby taken by Pam outside Yabsley House, the homestead of the Yabsley family for whom many of Ruby's family and other people from Box Ridge Mission Coraki had worked as labourers. In *Real Deadly* Ruby writes:

Then again I thought to myself, those early pioneers were in the debt of the Aboriginal labourers who helped build those big pioneer homesteads for little or next to no payment. I thought the whole of Australia should appreciate the Aborigines, cause the whole place was gotten on the blood sweat and tears of us blacks and we never did get any recognition for what we did, ever, in this country (1992, 64).

Ruby's relationship to land is based on a strong spiritual connection and it is from her writings that readers learn the stories that go with an Indigenous belonging to landscape that is deeply imbedded in an ancient history. In the opening piece in *Real Deadly*, she describes the Richmond River as 'being a source of abundant food for my people the Bundjalung tribes. Your shores, Bungawalbyn, Jackabulbyn, Minumi, Coraki, Gibberagee, all surrounded by a place known as the Big Scrub – plenty bush tucker around, bunihny, binging, burbi' (1992, p. 1).

Love of Bundjalung country and the Rainbow Region marks another connection I have to Ruby. In November 1974 I travelled with my two-year-old son Tamlin on the rickety red overnight train. As the sun rose Tamlin and I looked out of the train as it travelled through the most beautiful country I had ever seen. Purple jacarandas dotted the hillsides, while red flame trees lined the streets of country towns nestled in the hills. The subtropical climate began to knock against my inner city sensibilities in a most exciting way as I marveled at the weatherboard houses high up on stilts, surrounded by wide verandahs, with people sunning themselves on the steep back stairs (Conway Herron, 2003, p.167). For the next twenty years I travelled north whenever possible and then in 1995 I moved there permanently to complete my PhD. In 1996 I began teaching Creative writing at Southern Cross University in Lismore. It was natural with my interest in Indigenous Australian writing that I would use Ruby's work

as one of the foundation texts in my teaching and so her work became central to my own work over the next decade and a half.

In 1997 and 1999 Ruby, Pam and Ruby's two daughters, Aileen and Pauline came to visit me in the house I shared with my husband Peter in Byron Bay. They were memorable visits, ones that actually mark the beginning of a period of more intensive learning for me about the deeper layers of cultural belonging that are so important for Indigenous Australians. I am forever grateful for the visits she made to my home and for the doors of perception about Bundjalung country in particular that were opened to me as a result. On her first two visits we were living in a town house in Bundjalung country just across the road from the main beach at Byron Bay. Pam and Ruby were making a return visit to Bundjalung country after the successful publication of *My Bundjalung People* (1994). The stories in this book are based on memories and researched material generated via two road trips to Bundjalung country that Ruby and Pam had undertaken in 1990. The book is filled with Ruby's stories of growing up in the area placed alongside photos, taken mainly by Pam, but also including historical photos as well as others by friends such as Rita Georgiadis, Judy Anderson and Rita Bostock as well as a few shots by Ruby herself. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in finding out more about the history of the northern rivers area and in particular Bundjalung culture. Central to it is Ruby's story of growing up firstly on Box Ridge Mission, Coraki, then Bonalbo and later Casino. Like her previous works the stories and photos together make a narrative that serves as both a personal story and an historical document. In the foreword of *My Bundjalung People* (1994) Pam writes:

I was Ruby's driver, companion, sound-recordist, photographer and general dogsbody on the many trips we took back to her "home" country. We travelled over 20,000 kilometres in the first half of 1990 alone and continue through to the present day ... *My Bundjalung People* leads the reader through many of the journeys of the Bundjalung People and explains the tracks and roads and rivers of history that make Ruby's people "all one mob. ... Essentially, however this is the only documented history of the Bundjalung people that is made up of their views, their feelings, their facts" (author's emphasis). So it is true. It is a story of profound cruelty and injustice that begs for wrongs to be righted. It is also a story of hope and laughter and jokes, survival and love (Johnson in Langford Ginibi 1994, pp xi-xii).

## **Pam**

Margaret Tucker, in her autobiography, *If Everyone Cared* (1977) describes a realization that she has rights as an Aboriginal person:

I had always said, especially when I had been trying to get a point across to a white person, 'Oh, you want to think like an Aborigine if you want to help our people.' Then one day it hit me. Heaven forbid! Our people, the Aborigines, are people, not separate specimens' (1977, p.200).

Ruby Langford Ginibi argued frequently for the humanity of Indigenous people in Australia. While one part of her was thrilled with the opportunity to 'educate' another part of her was

always waiting for it all to be taken away. She was uncomfortable with accolades because she had been uplifted so many times, then landed smack on her bum, as she often said. Her realization that she personally should not be judged outside her own life and culture came about after a shocking review by Mary Rose Liverani of *Real Deadly* in *The Australian* in 1992. It is a good example of how she could be dehumanized. As a Scottish migrant, Liverani writes:

Ginibi can't write. Lacking formal education, and a literary or social context within which to appraise her experiences, she has difficulty making sense of her life or offering insight into it. She seems to view herself and her family as characters in an American slapstick comedy or cheap romance... (Liverani, 1992, p.6)

Liverani's review suggests that images and representations of Aboriginality are pervasive if constantly misrecognized or invisible in everyday Australian culture; they are images that are often remade and repossessed in the daily transactions of urban Indigenous living. Where Liverani sees the world of *Real Deadly* as one of unthinking and uncritical consumption – of everything from alcohol to take-away food to sitcoms – Ruby's writings represent an active process of negotiating with and surviving in a dominant culture that persistently devalues, degrades and disappears her history. Despite Liverani's claim to some authority, for Ruby the review highlighted all too clearly, the class, ethnic and national bias against her Aboriginality and humanity. The communities that Ruby was writing about are not incomplete or imperfect. Urban Indigenous people own a rich sociality and culture. The Indigenous families and communities that Ruby writes about maintain themselves despite a battery of assimilationist pressures. This is the world lovingly detailed in *Real Deadly*, a series of narratives, reflections and poems that takes up where *Don't Take Your Love to Town* leaves off. Some of the stories represent private and happy moments within the family. 'What gives them the goddam rights?' Ruby asked and was to ask often after this. This judgment of her life and her family was too much for Ruby and she charged in fighting. In challenging Liverani's and others so-called authority she writes:

They came with their godly marriages and paternalistic ways, and we were forced to assimilate... because our traditional practices were classified as 'heathen' and 'vermin' to be cleared off the face of the earth ... and we were forced by governments to become like white people... We have never been one nation – ever! – Because Aboriginal people have always been excluded in white social enclaves in this country. Even the people who migrate here are on a higher social level than we are. We are classified as the lowest of the low, and we are the first people of this land. (Ginibi, 1994, pp.8-12)

If they weren't trying to take her copyright they were illegitimising her writing, her community, her life! Ruby Langford Ginibi's writing existed side by side with this sort of warfare where she had to fight to prevent her own invisibility. One way or another, for her, it seemed like a constant battle to stand up and insist that she could write and what she wrote was true. The significance of this is clear when we think that before the 1967 citizenship referendum, Indigenous Australians were not included in the Australian census. Our existence as individuals was not officially registered and there was no place in official historical records of the Indigenous population. Writing autobiographically had been a very effective tool for Ruby in making non-Indigenous Australians aware of another history, the Indigenous

Australian history. Ruby's writing was also of great significance to Indigenous Australians as they could uniquely read their own experiences in a way that was both authentic and confirming. The written word does have its own authority, doesn't it? Ruby, through her writing, had an enormous audience both within, and outside Australia. Her writing ensured a changed perception of what 'Indigenous' was from inside a lived life. She spoke the truth. She was the expert. It changed an understanding of the politics of nations and the spirit of the thing. In their interview with Ruby, Penny van Toorn and Christine Watson observe:

The advantage of autobiography as a historical genre is that it brings the past 'up close and personal'. While an academic historical researcher might, for example, interpret historical records relating to governments' 'native policies' the Aboriginal autobiographer tells us what it was like to be on the receiving end of those policies. They can tell us at first hand how decisions made by politicians, bureaucrats, and social workers affected their day to day lives (Van Toorn, P., Watson C., 1998, p. 83).

Ruby was subject to the all those policies and she wrote about them, not as an historian, deductive and distant, but as a truth-teller and eyewitness to an enormous part of Australian history that would have remained invisible without her story telling. By writing her own life story, she tells how many Indigenous women lived. Through her own developing political awareness she is able to tell Australia what is not palatable: that Australia has a long history of racism and genocide towards its first people, the Indigenous Australians. Ruby Langford Ginibi repeated until she died that "we have to stop the killings time", a time that she says was not "in the past", because the killings times still exist in our present, and she wrote of this in describing among many things the endless incarceration of Indigenous people and the long and growing list of deaths in custody. Even after death she continues to be at the forefront of that chorus of Indigenous Australians speaking and writing against whitewashed versions of Australian history.

## **Janie**

In an analysis of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) Alison Ravenscroft (2012) writes about the way that: 'In prevailing white Australian Discourses, Indigenous Law is still read as if it were a form of fiction holding no explanatory power'. She goes on to discuss how a white Australian reader might read Indigenous Australian fiction as representing Indigenous Law as a 'fantastic story of magic powers, a naive story of origin' (2012 p.74). Thus the Indigenous writer is caught up in a process of legitimization in terms of European notions of Lore and law of the real and not real where even contemporary categorizations of magic realism can serve to doubly dismiss Indigenous ways of seeing. This observation also points, even if somewhat obliquely, to Ruby's anxiety about whether she's a fiction writer or not and the way her insistence on notions of truth telling might arise out of a fear her stories and her culture are being what she called 'disremembered' as well as dismissed by dominant white cultural prerogatives.

My memories of Ruby's visits to Bundjalung country and to my home are peppered with events that were full of laughter and warmth as well as knowledge about new cultural ways of

seeing. I remember going with Pam and Ruby to the cemetery at Coraki. On the way there Ruby explained to me that the graves of the Aboriginal people were separated from the graves of Non-Indigenous people and how, when no one looked after them, the Aboriginal people from Box Ridge Mission took it upon themselves to clean up the area. We drove into the cemetery and sure enough all the non-Indigenous gravesites were well looked after and maintained. Then Ruby spied the Indigenous area. "Looky, look, over there. There it is!" Ruby pointed at a fence painted in the distinctive Red, Yellow and Black of the Aboriginal flag. And there all cleaned up, all neat and tidy but without the larger monuments and plaster angels of the whitefella graveyard were the graves of the Bundjalung and other Aboriginal people buried there. I spent the next couple of hours in quiet contemplation as Ruby visited her departed relatives. She sat for a long time by her grandfather Sam Anderson's grave. As she spoke in Bundjalung language to the renowned cricketer that she had written about so many times in her books, I was staggered at the depth of this down-town urban Aboriginal woman's knowledge of her traditional culture. The way she conjured him through gesture and voice I could almost see him sitting down next to her smiling, reaching out to hold her hand in comfort.

From there we travelled back to Byron via Nimbin: as we drove towards the distinctive sentinels of the Nimbin Rocks, Ruby warned, "Don't go there, Baby Girl, it's not a place for women to go." And when I asked what would happen if I did, she laughed as she replied, "That old Nimbinji spirit man will come into your dreams and frighten you away, if you do that." I remembered my friends who had lived directly under those rocks while they were trying to have a baby. They were there for two years without getting pregnant and had been so besieged by bad dreams that they left the area and went to the coast. Within a very short time they got pregnant. Something about the look on my face must have prompted Ruby to reassure me because she leant forward and whispered conspiratorially: "I tell you what to do. Every time you go past those rocks, you talk to that ol' fella and tell him you're just passing through, and you're not staying. That way nothing can happen to you." This is something I will continue to do for the rest of my life.

In 1999 I interviewed Ruby for the third Byron Bay Writers Festival when she came up with her daughters Aileen, Pauline as well as Pam. She entertained a room full of enthusiastic readers all anxious to hear her speak about her work. At the end of the session the standing ovation she received was indicative not only of her popularity but also of her gift as an orator and cultural ambassador. In the following week she spoke to students at the Gungil Jindibah Centre, Southern Cross University, and was received equally well by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from a wide range of backgrounds and ages. On my desk I still have a photo of Aileen, Pauline, Ruby and myself taken at the festival just after the interview. Ruby is sitting in a wheel chair, a bemused expression on her face, her walking stick by her side, her ubiquitous hat covered in landrights badges and the red, yellow, black of Koori colours on her head and her glasses and a necklace with a boomerang on it around her neck. She has a bunch of tissues in her hand and a box of them is sitting at the foot of the chair. I'm kneeling by her side and Pauline and Aileen are standing behind her. It's a black and white photo but it doesn't take much to conjure up the colours, lots of red, black and yellow worn by all of us.

On that same trip Ruby requested that we take her to the beach. Not just any beach, she wanted to go down south of Broken Head where there wouldn't be too many people. We

drove through the countryside and along the winding dirt road that leads to the southern end of the bay where the car could drive closest to the beach so Ruby wouldn't have to walk to far on her ailing legs, as she called them. We helped her out of the car and down to the edge where water meets sand. She was so excited to be in her country and close to the sea. I will never forget the sight of her playing round in the shallows, gleefully rolling in the water with all her clothes on, like a child frolicking, happy to be fully in her country again. On the way down to the beach and back again we sighted lots of bush turkeys, in the bushes and on the road. 'This is a bush turkey dreaming place,' Ruby said, on the way back. 'I've got to be careful round here.' The morning after Ruby and the girls left to go back south to Sydney I got up very early and went to make a cup of tea. There in the middle of the courtyard was the biggest bush turkey I've ever seen just standing there looking at me, it's head on that distinctive red, yellow and black neck, jerking backwards and forwards as if looking for something or someone. When I called to Pete the bird turned around and scrambled over the fence. I quickly ran to the fence and looked over but the bird had disappeared completely. But to where? In front of me was a giant open space and it hadn't had time to fly anywhere. Even if it had there was no way it wouldn't have been seen in the sky. No. It had simply disappeared without a trace. That evening I called Ruby to see if they had all got home safely and to tell her about the bird. "Oh ho," Ruby chuckled. "That bird came to look for me 'cause I was somewhere I shouldn't have been."

A few weeks later a willy wagtail family came and nested in our roof and for the next few years we were there they returned every year. Knowing Ruby's affiliation with the tiny, cheeky bird with the fast wagging tail, I always felt that those birds felt safe being there after Ruby came to stay with us. Pete and I were in the early days of our relationship then and not long afterwards we were walking through the scrubby park on the foreshore of the beach at Suffolk Park. Out of the corner of my eye, when clutched in a passionate embrace, I saw a small bird flitting about. It was a willy wagtail standing on the path in front of us just staring at us with its keen eyes, its tail fanned out and wagging as it darted about. I know that the appearance of the wagtail was a warning for Ruby and is for many other Aboriginal people but because it's her totem I always feel her close by me when one's around. In an anthology titled *Belonging in the Rainbow Region* (2003) I write about Ruby coming to visit us in the house Pete and I had bought in Lismore. The chapter is titled 'Metaphoric Landscapes: Writing the Rainbow Region' and is a review of writers' work who have represented the north coast of New South Wales in their writing. Ruby also wrote the first story in the anthology and it's called 'My Belonging Place'. At the end of my chapter I describe our garden with Ruby sitting in it:

The garden in this place is already beautiful. Two blooming Jacarandas that frame our view of the golf course are filled with purple flowers and chattering multi-coloured parrots. There's azaleas here, frangipanis and camellias too and lots of flowers. Every weekend I'm out in the garden with my husband planting natives; grevilleas, bottlebrush, eucalypts, even a grass tree. We imagine our house surrounded by a forest in years to come. We are trying to attract birds and make a place for the night-grunting koalas to rest. This is our place I say ... it is strange that such ownership of land can make me feel so strong a sense of belonging. But I'm a whitefella and I need the strong sense of security that this kind of ownership can bring. Recently Ruby Langford Ginibi came to stay with me while on Land

Council business. We sat in the early morning on the front porch and she sighed as she looked up at the magnolias just beginning to bloom.

“Oh Janie,” she said, “What a lovely place you got here, it makes me want to come home for good.” And I smiled back, thinking how wonderful that would truly be. (Conway Herron 2003, p.176)

Not long after that Ruby rang us. “I was just wondering if Pete could get me a couple of trees from up there to plant in my backyard,” she asked, and the following Christmas we took a Macadamia and a Tippecanoe out to the house she was sharing with her son Nobby. It was difficult not to notice how incapacitated she was, but her inimitable spirit was distracting as she proudly showed us the paintings Nobby was working on.

In 2006, when she made her final trip to Bundjalung Country for a reunion on Cabbage Tree Island just south of us with Ruby’s daughter Dianne and her two children, they had to pack ‘a wheel chair, oxygen tank and pap machine’ (Langford Ginibi 2007, p.285). Still they managed to cover an enormous amount of countryside exploring Bundjalung country from Grafton to the Gold Coast dropping in on her other daughter Pauline at Helensvale in Queensland and then back south where they called in to Coraki:

We drove on into town then headed out to the mission, my birthplace. It was about ten hectares with nine houses built onto it in the shape of a square. There were a few jahjams (children) running around and I called out, “Is Gracie Cowan here?” The teenagers said, “no she moved to Casino.” Then when I told them I was born here they recognised my face, “Oh gee,” they said, “you’re that woman that wrote that book!” My family in the van started laughin’. “Yes I’m that old black woman writer,” I told em, as we drove out of there (Langford Ginibi 2007, p.292).

In 2001 I gained my doctorate from the University of Western Sydney but Ruby beat both Pam and me to our Doctorates. This was something Ruby was never going to let us forget and she teased me mercilessly at the party Pam threw for me in Sydney after the graduation ceremony. But I had always had the feeling that Southern Cross University, the university where I worked, being in Bundjalung country, should also honour her. Over quite a few years I put up this suggestion to the powers that be and in July 2010 my wishes came true when Ruby gained an Honorary Doctorate of Letters at the Sydney graduation ceremony for Southern Cross University. I was really disappointed not to be able to attend but I know from what Ruby, Pam and several colleagues told me about the event it was an absolutely cheeky affair. Ruby’s unmistakable sense of style and humour interrogated the pomp and splendour and the formality of the occasion, turning the solemnity on its head. But Ruby is no stranger to pomp and ceremony, she has received plenty of accolades including an Inaugural Fellowship from the NSW Ministry of the Arts in 1994 and an Inaugural Honorary Fellowship from the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, in 1995. In 2005 she won the NSW Premiers Literature Award and in 2007 she was named the Elder of the Year. In 2008, Ruby was a Don't DIS my ABILITY ambassador, the group's stated aim being to change misconceptions about people with disabilities.

2010 was also the year that Ruby launched my novel, *Beneath the Grace of Clouds*. I had given it to both Pam and Ruby to read years before and Ruby has sent the manuscript off to her publisher straight away with the admonishment that they “must publish this book.” Sadly,

they didn't, but when the novel finally came out and Ruby agreed to launch it I was over the moon.

In 2011, I convened an international conference on writing and ethics, titled 'Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds' for the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. The conference was in November and when Ruby passed away on October 1st we decided to dedicate the conference to her. Appropriately two strong Aboriginal women, Rhoda Roberts and Melissa Lukashenko, were keynote speakers at the conference and Bundjalung woman Rhoda led the tribute to her at the opening ceremony. Ruby had battled an enormous amount of physical problems that made the last years of her life extremely difficult for her. Still, when she passed away, it was a shock and an enormous loss for so many people who continue to mourn her. When I sat down to write the dedication for the program I wasn't sure how to write something that would seem adequate for such a great woman but reading it now the words still ring true:

This conference is dedicated to Aunty Ruby: a Bundjalung woman, multi award-winning author, historian and cultural ambassador, who devoted her writing life to 'educating others' about the lives of Indigenous Australians. Her humanity was all encompassing and amazing considering the pain and loss that walked side by side with her throughout her life. A prolific writer of nonfiction books, essays, poems and short stories, her contribution to the academy has been recognised by an inaugural Doctorate of Letters from Latrobe University, Victoria and a Doctorate of Letters from Southern Cross University, New South Wales. Ruby's unique sense of humour, incisive yet compassionate view of the world and the sound of her infectious laughter will be missed by all who knew her (Conway Herron 2011).

At the end of 2012 I will have been teaching at Southern Cross University for sixteen years. Throughout this time Ruby's work has nurtured and nourished my own. Ruby's writing has always been passionate, sincere and heart-felt, as well as being extraordinarily well crafted. She articulates a particular experience as Aboriginal mother, teacher and scholar for an Australian readership in need of such material, not just at a university level, but readers of all ages and from all persuasions of life.

## **Pam**

Ruby Langford Ginibi wrote and spoke of that ongoing war in Australia that includes the ongoing fight to defend Indigenous Australian traditional lands, the fight to recognize that Indigenous soldiers fought in all Australia's wars, which include the first and second world wars, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. She wrote for recognition of those Indigenous Australians who built modern rural Australia through their unpaid and unrecognized work. She wrote of terrible suffering and oppression. She also wrote of incredible heroism, sacrifice to family and community, and survival. For Australia to go forward, her writing MUST continue to be recognized, read, and discussed. It would be shameful if her work, after her death, was put into the back of the cupboard of history, and she was disremembered and dehumanized.

Ruby refocused the literary community's attention with the publication of *Don't Take Your*

*Love to Town*. With wry humour and raw emotion, Ruby told of her struggle against the odds to keep her family together. The book was a joint recipient of the Human Rights Commission Award for Literature and Other Writing and continues to be read as a hallmark text in Australian literature. As a person and a writer Ruby Langford Ginibi inspired admiration for her sharp intelligence and unrelenting energy. Her awards and literary works, which included short stories and poetry, are evidence of a passionate individual who used humour and honesty to heal and reconnect individuals and communities. Ginibi published many full-length works following *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, including *Real Deadly* (1992), *My Bundjalung People* (1994), *Haunted by the Past* (1999) and *All My Mob* (2007). She received an honorary doctorate from La Trobe University in 1998, a Writers' Emeritus Award from the Australia Council in 2005, and a Special Award from the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in 2005. One of her proudest achievements, though, was being named Elder of the Year (Female) at the National NAIDOC Awards in 2007.

The literary legacy of Ruby will continue to play a significant part in the shaping of Australian literature. Ruby almost single-handedly defined an entire generation of Aboriginal literature. Her works of fiction, poetry and autobiography will continue to inspire new generations of Aboriginal writers.

In a radio interview from 1992 (quoted in Perera, 2011), when speaking about her second book, *Real Deadly*, Ruby declared that: 'It's a good hope to educate people'. Suvendrini Perera, Professor at Curtin University, Western Australia said in her memorial to Ruby, 'those of us who had the benefit of her edu-ma-cation know just how much this hope governed her life. She spoke often of 'bumping her gums' to non-Aboriginal people, particularly those in positions of power, and her message was clear: 'Don't be gobbingh-miggingh [greedy guts] and take everything from us. You white people have to learn to give something back. You cannot take forever from us, because in the end, you'll destroy yourselves too... NINGINAH! STOP!'" (Perera, 2011, online). In statements like this Ruby is asking Australians to start rethinking – our collective history, our collective future, and ourselves.

Ruby Langford Ginibi's research methods were as rigorous as any historian's but it is the way she communicates this history that is significant. She related this history through dialogue, like a series of conversations with the people she was interviewing. Rather than telling the history in chronological order, she related it as a story of each of the four research trips she made to Northern New South Wales. As she travels from place to place she tells us the story of the actual journey she is making and relates the history via the conversations she has at each stop on the way. This technique allowed her to easily share her research methodology throughout the book as well as relate what her sources were and the difficulties and frustrations in doing this work. Ruby Langford Ginibi was ALWAYS about sharing: about 'edumacating'.

Aboriginal history has only recently and hesitatingly emerged into mainstream Australian consciousness. In many cases the best sources of Aboriginal history are the oral histories kept alive by the Aboriginal people themselves. Crimes were committed against Aboriginal people. Massacres did occur. Aboriginal children were forcibly taken from their families. Land was unjustly taken from Aboriginal people. All these issues are included in *My Bundjalung People* and referred to in most of her work. Her body of work continually asks such questions as: If a crime or a morally reprehensible deed was committed, why would the

person who has got off with it provide evidence which could be used against them? If someone witnessed these cruel acts and benefited from them, why would they say anything? However, snippets of evidence have slipped into the archives. Without the bigger picture and the inclusion of the full story as remembered by Aboriginal people, a non-indigenous historian can easily overlook the significance of just a couple of sentences here and there. This is the value of Aboriginal oral history. This is how Aboriginal historians can help us gain a better understanding of our own history. For the interactions between Aborigines and settlers in the past is a shared history – the bad as well as the good.

While Ruby's stories are often personal life histories, they transcend the individual experience to tell the experience of Aboriginal communities. They provide Aboriginal and female perspectives on Aboriginal experiences and culture. In this sense, the act of writing becomes a form of political consciousness and resistance. Ruby Langford Ginibi has written herself, plus Australian Indigenous lives and communities, into the Australian and International landscape and psyche. Having written, Ruby has started that change of perception of EVERYTHING as she had always intended. That is her importance and will continue to be the significance of Ruby Langford Ginibi.



## **Notes:**

### **Allawah**

Aboriginal Hostel in Granville, New South Wales, part of the network of hostels established for older Indigenous people to live.

### **Appropriation**

A fundamental aspect in the history of the arts (literary, visual, musical) appropriation can be understood as the use of borrowed elements in the creation of a new work. In the visual arts, to appropriate means to properly adopt, borrow, recycle or sample aspects (or the entire form) of man-made visual culture. Strategies include "re-vision, re-evaluation, variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel... pastiche, paraphrase, parody, homage, mimicry, shan-zhai, echo, allusion, intertextuality and karaoke." The term appropriation refers to the use of borrowed elements in the creation of a new work (as in 'the artist uses appropriation') or refers to the new work itself (as in 'this is a piece of appropriation art'). Inherent in our understanding of appropriation is the concept that the new work recontextualises whatever it borrows to create the new work. In most cases the original 'thing' remains accessible as the original, without change (see: 2007 *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Visual Arts*, Australia Council for the Arts, Strawberry Hills NSW).

### **David Unaipon**

(Born David Ngunaitponi) (28 September 1872 – 7 February 1967). David was an Australian Aboriginal of the Ngarrindjeri people, a preacher, inventor and writer. He was the most widely known Aboriginal in Australia and broke stereotypes of Aboriginals. Unaipon is featured on the Australian \$50 note in commemoration. Some of Unaipon's traditional Aboriginal stories were published in a 1930 book, *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aboriginals*, under the name of anthropologist William Ramsay Smith. They have recently been republished in their original form, under the author's name, as *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigine*.

### **La Perouse**

An historical Aboriginal settlement. 1878 marked a change in the nature of the Aboriginal community at La Perouse. Aboriginal people from the south coast moved to Sydney to seek employment or government rations and some moved to La Perouse, probably because it was a good fishing site. During the early 1880s, the Parkes government was under increasing pressure to take action on Aboriginal affairs and in 1882 Sir Henry Parkes appointed George Thornton as Protector of Aborigines. Thornton believed that Aboriginals should be removed from urban locations, yet he did honour the request of five Aboriginal men and their families to be allowed to stay at La Perouse. He justified his decision to Parliament by arguing that the camp was economically viable, in contrast with other camps in Sydney, which were seen as parasitic and a nuisance to society. Thornton organised for huts to be built for people camped at La Perouse. By 1881 there were approximately 50 Aboriginal people living in two camps in the Botany Bay region, 35 at La Perouse and the remainder at Botany Bay. The people were free to travel between the two camps. In 1985 Yarra Bay House was granted to La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council. In 2008, there were about 420 people living in La Perouse. Over one-third of the population is Aboriginal. In August 2005, the local Aboriginal community signed a shared responsibility agreement which was intended to deliver housing improvements in return for residents paying rent to the La Perouse land council and documenting their histories.

**The Flag:** The Australian Aboriginal flag was designed by Indigenous artist Harold Thomas, from Humpty Doo in the Northern Territory as a way to bring all Aboriginal Nations together at the time of the Tent Embassy establishment in 1970. The flag has a black banner top representing the black history and a red banner bottom representing the sacred red ochre of

Mother Earth while central, and over the top of these two banners is a yellow circle representing the sun.

### Referendum

On May 27, 1967, 90.77% of Australian voters recorded the largest ever 'Yes' vote in a referendum to alter the Australian constitution. This referendum finally enabled Aboriginal people to be counted in the national census and to be subject to Commonwealth laws, rather than just state laws.

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