

Stephen Muecke

Shuffle

We worked together on 'Paperbark'.
He might have suggested the name, since it was his,
and Oodgeroo's too.
A tradename for Aboriginal writers.

We met at Jack Davis' place in Fremantle:
Mudrooroo Narogin,
Adam Shoemaker and me.
Shuffling through the offerings,
Like leaves scattered on the floor.
Fingering leaves, that might break ...

'A Collection of Black Australian Writings',
with a boost of Bicentennial money
that went into the Unaipon Award.

A book not as robust, we thought,
as oral traditions.
Repeated, elaborated, embellished,
and always in the warmth of
mother tongues,
cuddling for bedtime stories,
so you don't forget.

"Black Australian", as if
presaging the scandal
of genetic origins.
Was he Nyoongar, or Black?

Some Nyoongars didn't know.
One blackfella says,
"He never come to any of our barbecues!"
Must have kept to himself.
Too busy writing.

Like: "We'll kill your reason
With unreason;
The murdered child,
His people waiting;
We'll kill you stone dead,
And eat you with your cannibalism!"

("Sunlight Spred eagles Perth In Blackness.
A bicentennial gift poem'.
By Colin Johnson.
Perth, Western Australia, 1985.)

The scandal broke and spread,
as the man who wrote the first novel,
Wild Cat Falling,
was pushed aside.
Words were his only real Country.

Blackfellas don't care about pious origins.
Ruby Langford Ginibi got wind,
And wrote a letter to the editor:
"If your people don't like you, Muddy,
You can come stay with me!" Trustori!

She loved all kinds of strays,
but he couldn't stay:

"Let me be as unique as I want to be,
Let me dance this shuffling step,
Let me murmur this soft song".

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