

**Penny van Toorn.** *Writing Never Arrives Naked. Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia.* Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, 2006, 280pp., A\$ 39.95 RRP. ISBN (13) 978 0 85575 544 7.

Reviewed by **Nadja Lüdemann, Hamburg.**

In this academic study van Toorn, a senior lecturer in Australian Literature and Australian Studies at the University of Sydney, investigates the different cultural

circumstances and institutional settings in which Australian Aboriginal people produced written texts. The book covers the time span from the early colonial era to contemporary Aboriginal writing. In nine chapters, various aspects of Aboriginal writing are discussed and completed by a short conclusion.

Most importantly, Penny van Toorn challenges the established view that Indigenous oral traditions and cultures have become redundant after the introduction of Western cultures in Australia. Instead, she claims that the Indigenous people of Australia are engaged in a complex interplay between their own culture and the practices introduced by the British settlers. This led them to the development of a new culture of reading and writing. In this matter, vital questions arise: At the outset of *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, van Toorn asks questions such as “What counts as writing?”, “What counts as authorship?” and “Who counts as Aboriginal?” Her aim is to leave behind “Eurocentric concepts of authorship” by including other genres such as fiction and poetry.

In *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, Van Toorn effectively tells the story of how the European culture of reading and writing – which was introduced by the British – mingled with the oldest living cultures in the world. The first chapter entitled *Encountering the alphabet* characterizes three distinct cultures of early Aboriginal literacy: those based on individual black-white collaborations, those that developed without European guidance and those that emerged on missions and reserves. In the second chapter, *Sky gods and stolen children*, Penny van Toorn illustrates how Aboriginal children were taken away from their families. The white authorities justified their removal with teaching them how to read. As van Toorn describes, there is a connection between the early history of the stolen generations with the early history of Aboriginal literacy: The first Indigenous Australians who were able to read were stolen children – and the first Indigenous author was Bennelong, a ‘stolen adult’.

In 1796, Bennelong dictated a letter to a steward. It was the first piece of writing authored by an Indigenous Australian. Chapter 3 deals with this letter in detail and states that it is a “product of inter-cultural entanglement”. In the following chapter *Borderlands of Aboriginal writing* van Toorn discusses how Aboriginal people and colonists used each other’s writing systems in accordance with their own desires and traditions of inscription. This kind of writing ‘cross-borders’ between different categories of writing. Traditionally, primitive beginnings of writings have been located in a pictographic stage while the final stage has been claimed to be one of ‘writing proper’ by using the alphabet. While Indigenous peoples were said to be fixed at the pictographic stage, Europeans had apparently invented the alphabet. Penny van Toorn suggests that these ‘borderland zones’ are spaces of

exchange in which writing can precede literacy and the line between writing and non-writing becomes unstable.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deal with mission and reserve cultures. One region van Toorn selected is Tasmania, until 1856 called “Van Diemen’s Land”. She examines a time when the Indigenous peoples of Tasmania first engaged with the Bible and were observed by colonial officials who regarded the Bible as a tool for assimilation. Another mission discussed is Lake Condah Mission Station in south-western Victoria. In this context, van Toorn analyzes the ways in which writing worked as a performative medium in Victoria from the mid-1870s to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter 8 entitled *Early writings by Aboriginal women* engages with the effects of colonialism on Indigenous women. Here, Van Toorn asks questions such as “What roles did Aboriginal women take up as readers and writers in colonial Australia?” and “What social functions did their writing perform?” The role of women in the writing process is discussed in detail and it becomes clear to the reader that women addressed colonial officials on a wide range of issues and that they were writing mainly for themselves and their families rather than for larger community groups. The last chapter traces the connection between contemporary Indigenous Australian literary practices and the cultures of literacy that developed in the colonial period. The focus is on a series of moments in history when Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures became entangled. From this, questions like “How do the social relations within which Aboriginal people write, publish and read books today differ from those that prevail in European book cultures?” and “How have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people gone about the process of making books together?”

Historically, books have functioned as an imposed technology of power. Van Toorn gives a detailed account of how books were icons of Western civilisation as well as an instrument of oppression. She discusses the Indigenous viewpoint which regards oral narratives as more reliable than books, as well as the problems which arise when oral narratives are transformed into books. Another interesting aspect of this chapter is the gap between Western and Indigenous authorship: While in Western cultures any person writing on any subject who can find a publisher is called the author of a book, and any literate person is potentially a reader, in traditional Aboriginal societies the giving and receiving of information is regulated by kinship networks, age etc. Penny van Toorn concludes chapter 9 by giving an account of her own work as an editorial assistant for the Aboriginal author Ruby Langford Ginibi.

*Writing Never Arrives Naked* is an all-embracing informative book which deepens our knowledge of the history of Indigenous writing in Australia, and at the same time highlights innovative aspects of contemporary Indigenous literature and literacies.

Shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Non-fiction, 2007. Special Commendation for the Walter McRae Russell Award, 2007, for best book of literary scholarship on an Australian subject, published in the preceding two calendar years.

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