

Visiting Manyallaluk: The work of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation

By Kate Grenville



Enter 'remote indigenous communities' into most of our mental search engines and what comes back is bleak: dust, skinny dogs, sick babies. Kids sniffing petrol. grog everywhere.

What we don't seem to see on TV are the success stories. Green, quiet, grog-free places. Schools full of smart, healthy, eager kids.

I wouldn't have believed that they existed unless I'd seen them, and most of us never get that chance. Not long ago I was invited to visit a couple of communities, as part of the Indigenous Literacy Project – the book industry's initiative to get books into remote communities. What I saw there pretty much floored me.

Manyallaluk Community, a couple of hours east of Katherine, has less than a hundred people. It's a little green oasis in endless dry dusty miles – a waterhole with pink lilies, houses hidden behind trees, and a two-room school with twenty or so kids.

Of course, we were special visitors. We were seeing the place at its best. Are there always oranges and muffins for morning break? Do the kids always wear their smart green-and-white 'Manyallaluk' T-shirts? Maybe not. But what can't be faked is the happiness, healthiness and confidence of those kids. Whatever's going on in Manyallaluk, it's working.

Children's author Andy Griffiths showed the older kids (about eight to twelve) how they might go about writing and illustrating little books of their own. In the other classroom Kaz Cooke worked with the younger kids, drawing and writing.

Helping the kids with their stories was about ten kinds of education for me. The reality of operating all day in a foreign language was an eye-opener – these kids speak at least two local languages plus 'Kriol', but English is their third or fourth language. They know it mainly through TV and DVDs – it's not any of their languages of ordinary life.

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I tried to imagine what it would be like to be an English-speaking kid sent to school in, say, Vietnam, and expected to function straight away – in every subject, maths as well as reading – in Vietnamese. Add to that the fact that the local languages are almost purely oral languages, so these kids don't live in a world where things get written down, and they're starting off with a daunting hurdle.

But these kids were doing it. Slowly, painstakingly, conscientiously dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't', they started to write their stories. I spent some time with Billy, a tall thin curly-headed nine-year-old, a kind of Aboriginal

Buddy Holly. 'Buffalo Hunting', his story was called. *First we pack up the gear* (a detailed drawing showed the rifles and the ropes and the Toyota full of people).

Easy to forget what a random language English is. Why does *pack* need that c? Why isn't *gear* spelled gere or geer? Which is where reading comes in. Kids who live surrounded by words – cereal packets, TV guides, street signs, bedtime books read by parents – have a head start in the vagaries of our rich muddle of a language. The Manyallaluk kids don't have any of that – what you might call ambient written English.

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One reason, of course, is that their parents, by and large, aren't writers or readers. Storytellers, yes – long, intricate, multi-layered stories. Fluent readers of country, yes. But no newspapers, no bedtime books. And Manyallaluk doesn't

need street signs. Even at the school there aren't many books. As many parents know, fund-raising is where most of the books in public school libraries come from – all those cake stalls and sausage sizzles. At places like Manyallaluk, there's not a lot of employment, not a lot of money. A 'school library' is an unknown luxury.

This is the situation Suzy Wilson of Riverbend Books in Queensland saw a few years ago. She saw that what was needed was a circuit-breaker – a means of getting books into those communities so that the kids (and their parents) have something to work on in their efforts to get a handle on English. The Indigenous Literacy Project involves booksellers, publishers and authors. In consultation with the communities, and working in partnership with the Fred Hollows Foundation, it now gets books into 140 communities.

But if English is pretty irrelevant to life in communities, why make those heroic efforts to learn it? The answer, of course, is that it's about having options: without functional English, there are precious few opportunities for education, training, employment – for any kind of engagement with the world beyond the community. For the world beyond the community. It's not about replacing indigenous languages with English. It's about adding English to the language repertoire of people who are already multi-lingual.

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Sitting with the kids at Manyallaluk, it was plain that they want the options that English represents. Remembering my feeble efforts to learn French at school, I knew something of how hard it was for them to get their stories down, how frustrating it must be for Billy to limit all that he knew about buffalo hunting to what he had the English words for.

We go out from community. We find the buffalo. We kill it. (A graphic line drawing with a pool of dramatic red blood.) At this point I could see that Billy was tired from the struggle of writing English. You sick of this? I asked, and he nodded feelingly. But I was interested now. How do you cut up the buffalo? I asked. Cut off the legs first? Billy came to life again. He showed me, very carefully, exactly how you use the knife – one hand pulling it, the other steadying its course – to slice down the sides of the belly and then across – 'like an H'. Then the skin can be pushed off with the fists and the carcass cut up with the hatchet. He went back to his book, determined to finish it. *We put the leaves in the Toyota to dry the blood. Then we take the beef back to community.*

Later it struck me that all the stories I read that day – 'Emu-egg Hunting', 'Playing Basketball', 'Visiting Aunty Margaret in Darwin', 'The 4th Goal' and the rest – had something in common. The first-person pronoun was always in the plural. These were, indeed, *communities*, where people do things together.

There are remote indigenous communities where the kids are battling illness, appalling living conditions, domestic violence and the whole sad, all-too-familiar story of dysfunction. But there are others, like the ones we saw outside Katherine, where the members of the community are making sure that things are working. It's part of whitefella culture to look always for the big picture, but sometimes there isn't a big picture, just a lot of small ones. One size doesn't fit all, stereotypes aren't the whole picture.

As the Black Arm Band sings with passionate optimism, out of little things, big things grow.

Addendum

This wonderful article from Indigenous Literacy Foundation (ILF) ambassador, Kate Grenville, appeared in *Meanjin* three years ago. We are now known as a Foundation rather than a project and reach more than two hundred communities with our book supply programme. Find out more about the ILF and how your school can help raise funds by visiting www.indigenoussliteracyfoundation.org.au

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Kate Grenville is one of Australia's best-known authors. She's published eight books of fiction and four books about the writing process. Her best-known works are the international best-seller *The Secret River*, *The Idea of Perfection*, *The Lieutenant* and *Lilian's Story*. Her novels have won many awards both in Australia and the UK, several have been made into major feature films, and all have been translated into European and Asian languages. (Taken from Grenville's website <http://kategrenville.com/biography>).