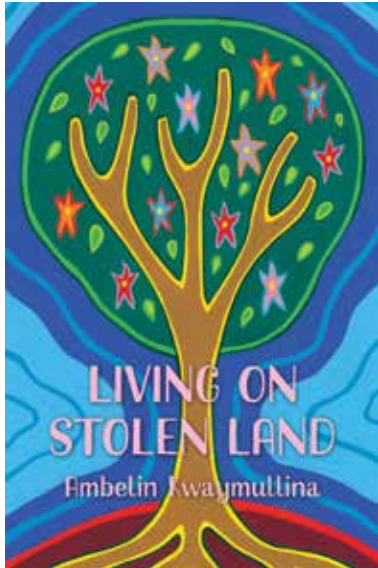


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Living on Stolen Land

Ambelin Kwaymullina

2020

Magabala Books

Broome, Western Australia

Flexibound, 63 pages

RRP \$22.99

*Reviewed by Alexandra Pierce
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I am an Anglo-Australian. This is important to note for this review because every day I benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous Australians, quite literally in my case as a descendant of the Duracks who settled in the Kimberley. *Living on Stolen Land* makes my privilege in living like this very clear. It also makes it clear that what I really want to do—give you my interpretation of the entire book—is exactly what I shouldn't do, because it would be a white woman putting into her words what an Indigenous woman has already said. And, as Ambelin

Kwaymullina points out, there's been enough of that already.

Living on Stolen Land is a free-verse poem, and a manifesto with a vision for how Australia's population can live together with understanding. It's also an illustrated book, with Kwaymullina's pictures throughout. And it's a history lesson, and an anthropological one, and a study in comparative thought. In 63 sparsely worded pages of text and illustrations, Kwaymullina covers an astonishing amount of ground.

Kwaymullina presents a clear picture about the reality of living on stolen land: 'There is no part of this place / that was not / is not / cared for / loved / by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nation' (p. 3). She also presents an eye-opening explanation of what it means to have a settler-colonial mindset and what 'narrative sovereignties' mean, especially in contrast to that settler mindset (p. 9). I believe that her words could help non-Indigenous students to understand these different approaches to the land; they certainly helped clarify it for me.

As a History teacher, one of the most fascinating sections of the poem is Kwaymullina's reflection on time ('weaponized against Indigenous peoples / Our life ways / called "backward"') and time that moves in cycles, and 'exists in space' (pp. 12–13). Thinking of time in this way means that 'individual actions matter powerfully / radiating out / across all that would be thought of / in a linear sense / as past / present / future'; it also means that 'linear years / have never moved anyone so far / that meaningful action cannot be taken / to address the wounds / of settler-colonialism' (p. 14). As a human, this had a profound impact on the

way that I personally think about my attitude towards reconciliation.

Having mentioned this, it's only right to note that Kwaymullina has a fairly long, clear-eyed and—for me—devastating section on the behaviours that settlers can exhibit. One of these is talking 'about Indigenous peoples / or rather / they talk about the part / that Indigenous peoples have played / in their own life journey' (pp. 45–46). This is something that I think earnest, well-meaning people can easily slip into, and it's absolutely something to avoid.

Kwaymullina also discusses people who talk about Indigenous Australians but do not give those same people space to speak. This is something I'm trying very hard to avoid here; using this book in the classroom will help us to avoid it there.

Living on Stolen Land is a book that can and should be used in the History classroom. It fits into the Victorian Curriculum at Levels 9 and 10, in both the 'Australia and Asia' and 'Rights and Freedoms' Historical Knowledge sections. It could also be used at Levels 5 and 6, and even Levels 3 and 4, with appropriate context and careful exploration.

And it's not only History that can (and should) make use of it: the ideas that Kwaymullina presents also interact with Geography (Levels 3 and 4, 7 and 8, and 9 and 10, at least), and Outdoor and Education Studies. Plus, any extra-curricula work around reconciliation will find motivation in Kwaymullina's vision for the future: that Indigenous Australians 'are not a problem to be solved / we are partners on pathways / to all the knowledges / inventions / joys / wonders / that will come out of / respectful relationships' (p. 63).