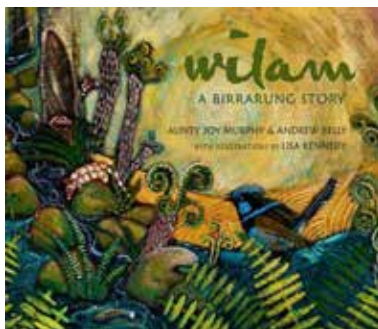


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Wilam: A Birrarung Story

By Aunty Joy Murphy and Andrew Kelly
Illustrated by Lisa Kennedy

2019

Black Dog Books

Hardback, 40 pages, illustrated

RRP: \$26.99

ISBN: 9781925381764

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Following on from their award-winning illustrated book *Welcome to Country* (2016), Wurundjeri Woiwurrung Elder Aunty Joy Murphy and Trawlwoolway artist Lisa Kennedy have collaborated with author and Yarra Riverkeeper Andrew Kelly to produce *Wilam: A Birrarung Story*. A bilingual text written in English and the Kulin language Woiwurrung, in 2020 *Wilam* was recognised by the Children's Book of the Year Award with Honours in the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books.

In its richly illustrated pages, *Wilam* exhibits Woiwurrung knowledge and understandings surrounding Melbourne's iconic Yarra River, which the Woiwurrung people call *Birrarung* ('river of mists'). The book tells a story of a day in the life of *Birrarung*, from its mountainous source and 'its long winding path down to *palem warreen*' (salt water; bay) at its mouth (p. 4).

The notion of home is at the core of the book, as *Wilam* means 'home' in the Woiwurrung language. *Wilam*'s narrative covers many of the plants, animals and ecosystems that, along with the Woiwurrung people, call *Birrarung* home. In showcasing Woiwurrung knowledge and understandings of *Birrarung* and Country, *Wilam* uses Woiwurrung words and names for the animals, plants and natural features it discusses, such as *ngua* (sun), *wallert* (possum), *warin* (wombat), *dulai-wurrung* (platypus) and *garrang* (eucalypt).

The book is set in contemporary Melbourne. This is a powerful act of Woiwurrung sovereignty and an effective educational tool. By being placed in present-day Melbourne, *Wilam* assertively combats prevalent notions that urbanised environments, such as Melbourne, are no longer First Nations spaces, which are to be only found in 'the outback'. Such views are dispelled by *Wilam*, whose pages firmly acknowledge and emphasise, to a non-Indigenous reader, that the Woiwurrung people, language and culture are not in the past. In this regard, *Wilam* encapsulates the strong words of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung community:

Despite the devastating impact of colonisation, the spirit of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung families could not be broken. We remain active in the community today ... practising culture, performing ceremonies and passing on knowledge to the younger generations on our traditional lands.¹

Although the book is principally aimed at early primary school ages, *Wilam* also has immense academic value, and is an educational tool for all ages, including adults. *Wilam*'s scholarly value dwells in the realms of Aboriginal history, ecological and biological knowledge systems, languages and nomenclature, as well as environmental studies, public history and decolonisation theory.

It must also be stated that *Wilam* is a significant educational tool for the Woiwurrung community—an important and accessible aid in teaching and passing on their language within their community. Meanwhile, in a school setting, this book provides a fantastic resource for teachers to bring Woiwurrung language, knowledge systems, epistemologies and histories into the many classrooms located across Woiwurrung Country.

I would also recommend this beautiful book to anyone, young or old, who has a keen interest in the history of the Melbourne region and Australian First Nations histories and cultures. Works such as *Wilam* inform non-Indigenous Australians of their local First Nations histories, cultures and languages, allowing them to be brought to the forefront of local contemporary society and culture.

In years to come, as the result of the creation and influence of educational resources such as *Wilam*, Kelly says that those who live on Woiwurrung Country may soon:

... talk of *warin* instead of wombats and *dulai-wurrung* instead of platypus ... [using] Woiwurrung words, like New Zealanders use Maori words ... slip[ping] effortlessly between one language and another, acknowledging in that act the place where we live and the traditional owners of that place.²

References

- 1 Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, 'Beside the *Birrarung*,' in *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*, ed. Alisa Bunbury (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2020), 131.
- 2 Andrew Kelly, 'Q&A with Andrew Kelly, Co-author of *Wilam: A Birrarung Story*,' interview by Olivia Fricot, Booktopia, May 30, 2019, <https://www.booktopia.com.au/blog/2019/05/30/qa-andrew-kelly-wilam-a-birrarung-story/>.