

## Noongar stories resonate across time

HEATHER ZUBEK February 18, 2014, 12:16 pm



Author and academic Kim Scott

In 1931 a young graduate student fresh from the University of Chicago undertook extensive research on a number of Australian Aboriginal languages; in particular, the languages and stories of the Noongar people. Gerhardt Laves was the first person trained in modern linguistic analysis to ever study the language groups of Australia.

After this fieldwork that took him around the country, Laves returned to Chicago where he turned his back on any further linguistic study. His extensive collection of notes sat in storage in various basements and attics until 1983 when an anthropology student from Chicago learnt of the archive. The student met with Laves and arranged for his collection to be deposited in the library at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra.

These field notes are of great significance to the culture and language of the Noongar families and people in the Albany region. Today, some stories that were told to Laves have been

translated and published for future Noongar generations as well as non-Aboriginal Australians.

According to Miles Franklin Literary Award winner and Noongar descendant Scott, the process of getting these stories on to the page has been a powerful one.

"The business of bringing scraps of paper with marks on them back into a community of descendants and working with those stories was just very emotionally intense," Scott says.

Four stories inspired by the original tales told to Laves have been published as part of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, of which Kim Scott is a part. The stories are told in the Noongar language, translated into English and illustrated by members of the Noongar community.

The stories were workshopped in a series of community meetings that included the descendants of the elders who spoke with Laves.

"We got together during these workshops and tried to enjoy ourselves," Scott says. "Telling stories, singing songs and getting ourselves within the embrace of the old language."

Scott believes that the retelling of these ancient stories is more than just a lesson in language regeneration.

"There's a great deal of healing that happens through these stories and a validation of aspects of our heritage. There were a lot of tears during the early workshops."

Groups of Wirlomin Noongar have visited schools to present the ancient tales to children.

"These types of presentations put the Noongar culture and country in the centre, giving us a sense of pride and power," Scott says.

The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project will be presenting at the Perth Writers Festival this weekend. For more information, visit [wirlomin.com.au](http://wirlomin.com.au) and [2014.perthfestival.com.au](http://2014.perthfestival.com.au).

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