

Slightly addicted to fiction

Saturday, September 17, 2011

[Mamang: keeping language alive](#) .



Kim Scott calls it the most important work he has ever done. Nine years after the project commenced, two picture books written in the Noongar language, with English translation, were launched yesterday in Albany, Western Australia. This is the country of [Kim Scott](#), winner this year of just about every literary award going, including the [Miles Franklin](#) and the [Commonwealth Writers' Prize](#) (SE Asia and Pacific) for [That Deadman Dance](#). Yet he regards these two picture books as his most important work. Why would this be so?

[Mamang and Noongar Mambara Bakiti](#) are the products of a series of workshops held in WA's Great Southern Region since 2002 that have reclaimed some stories of the original inhabitants. The [Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project](#) aims:

to reclaim Wirlomin stories and dialect, in support of the maintenance of Noongar language, and to share them with Noongar families and communities as part of a process to claim, control and enhance Wirlomin Noongar cultural heritage.

The [Noongar people](#) are indigenous to the south west of WA. I had not heard the term 'Wirlomin' before but the explanation in *Mamang* shows why:

Wirlomin? Literally, it means curlew-like. It is not a name that features even in the most commonly cited Aboriginal language maps, and only hinted at in the archives. Since we are considering language survival and the weight of heritage a tongue can carry, it's probably apt that the name is so very reliant upon oral history. The name is also associated with a particular site, ceremony and song.

So these books are preserving the language and culture of a very particular group of Noongar people. The stories came to light when the family of [Gerhardt Laves](#), a US linguist, returned his notes to Australia to be placed under the guardianship of the [Australian Institute of](#)

[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies](#) (AIATSIS). Laves had worked with the Wirlomin group and recorded their stories in 1931 and Kim Scott records the process of recovery and the creation of the picture books in a concluding essay in both volumes.

With [Princess Royal Harbour](#) in Albany the backdrop to the book launch, we wouldn't have been surprised to see a whale or two, echoing the images in *Mamang*. If you've heard Kim speak you'll understand how mesmerising he can be, but to hear him speak in 'language' was an additional joy. Curlew-like indeed. Deeply involved in the project since the beginning, he acknowledged those who were there all those years ago who are now no longer here to see its completion, he spoke of the delicacy of a project that began with involvement of direct descendants of Laves's informants and has rippled outwards until it reached the world yesterday, and he spoke of the empowerment that mastery of language can bring.

Kim Scott was introduced by [Lester Coyne](#), a Noongar elder who is heading off to Geneva tomorrow to participate in a UN panel on the 'role of languages and culture in the promotion and protection of the well-being and identity of indigenous peoples'. He had been advised just that morning that his prepared 12-minute presentation had been cut back to five minutes, and he is speaking on behalf of all 500+ Australian Indigenous languages, not just Noongar - languages that are on the brink of extinction in a country where their speakers are the non-dominant culture, unlike many other countries that will be represented. He was not pleased, and you can bet he will be letting the UN know.

The number of young Noongar people at the launch is an indication that this generation is now realising the importance of the preservation of their culture. You can see why Kim Scott is so proud of this work, and with his status in the literary world now cemented, who better to bridge our two worlds and lead us across.

<http://slightlyaddictedtofiction.blogspot.com/2011/09/mamang-keeping-language-alive.html>