

Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina. *Catching Teller Crow*. Allen and Unwin, 2018.

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1 *Catching Teller Crow*, published in August 2018, is Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina's first co-authored YA novel. As a sibling team, they have collaborated in the past on short novels and picture books, and this publication adds to their long-standing literary track record – delving deep into one of colonialism's darkest legacies: the stolen generations in Australia and the history of forced child removal.¹ "I'm not telling you what happened to ask for help", says Isobel Catching, one of the narrative's young adult protagonists, but "to be heard" (100), thus offering the novel's programmatic punch-line. Twenty-one years after the "Bringing them Home Report", which concluded the "National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families" (1997), *Catching Teller Crow* tackles the unfinished business of colonialism and offers a powerful story of strength, resilience and survival.

2 *Catching Teller Crow* is not the coming-of-age narrative one might expect, as the narrative strategically informs the coming-of-age theme with a highly political undercurrent: if, as is the case for the three teenage girl protagonists, coming of age means, ironically, to become able to overcome the trauma of abuse and death, to become able to 'move on' – where is the line between past and present? Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina's work establishes a powerful narrative space between fantasy and/or speculative young adult fiction, and a literary call to keep alive the memory of Aboriginal children separated from their families and abused in mission schools and white foster homes during the stolen generations. Combining elements and conventions of fantasy, speculative, crime- and horror fiction, *Catching Teller Crow* foregrounds and centers around the multiple dimensions of 'unfinished business' in relation to Australian settler-colonialism and genocide against Indigenous peoples.

3 Beth Teller, the novels lead protagonist, died in a car accident aged 15, but has not moved on to the 'other side' but instead inhabits a place 'in-between' the world of the living and the dead.

1 For in-depth reading about Indigenous child removal in Australia, please see the works of Anna Haebich (Curtin University, Perth), who has written extensively about the stolen generations and genocide in settler-colonial Australia: *For Their Own Good – Aborigines and Government in the South West of Western Australia 1900-1940* (first published 1988), *Broken Circles – Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* (first published 2000), and *Dancing in Shadows – Histories of Nyungar Performance* (2018).

Indeed, the narrative challenges and transcends the clear-cut boundary between these two levels of existence and thus opens up a narrative space in which the spirits of the dead hang on to a world which they, like Beth Teller, are not yet ready to leave behind or, in the case of Isobel Catching and Crow, not ready to forgive. As a ghost or spirit being, Beth follows her father – police detective Teller, who is investigating the consecutive deaths of three men running a children’s home that mysteriously burned down in remote and rural Australia. The investigation reveals a history of organized child abuse under the very eyes of a complicit local chief of police, and the uncovering of the home’s dark history which provides the starting point of a healing process outside of and far beyond the text: “It’s the beginning that hasn’t happened yet” (188). The deep roots of systematic abuses of power targeting Aboriginal children remain yet to be unearthed and a ‘reconciliation’ of the past, a potential beginning of a decolonized future, has yet to happen. The ‘closure’ of one particular story, the narrative suggests, is just the beginning of a much bigger project of healing and acknowledging the many other stories that are still hidden from view.

4 *Catching Teller Crow* merges elements of narrative prose and poetry, and blurs the line between the present and the past as Beth Teller and her father listen to Isobel Catching’s account of being captured, held hostage in a tunnel system under the home, being abused and, finally, being able to escape. The merging and blending of perspectives, as well as of forms and modes of narration, is the novel’s primary strategy to craft a powerful and politically charged story of trauma without, however, running the risk of traumatizing its young adult readers or sanitizing the issue of abuse. Rather, a strong sense of resilience and resistance against ongoing forms of victimization are characteristic of Catching’s accounts, offered in free verse poetry which is densely metaphoric and rich in symbolism: “The Feed is large. White. Thin. .../ He bends to inspect me. .../ The Feed grabs my wrist. Drags me across the room...Long fingers dig into my skull.../As if I’m bleeding rainbows. He *eats what’s* inside *our insides*.../ ‘This grey is yours’ I say. ‘My colours are mine. I’m not carrying your shame for what you did. Only my pride. For surviving you.’” (110, 168). Expressing experiences in poetry in this narrative, functions to ‘visualize’ the fracture and shock caused by pain and abuse, achieving a visual language which is able to express and narrativize violence without resort to ‘sensationalism’. Isobel Catching’s free-verse poetry is a function of her expressive autonomy and display of sovereign agency. Her words, like her colors, are her’s.

5 Significantly, *Catching Teller Crow* stresses that storytelling matters deeply, and that narrative can be a key to healing and thus a means to survive. In captivity, Isobel Catching recounts

the names and stories of her ancestors, holding on to a long family line of strong Aboriginal women who survived colonization, acknowledging the power of imagination harnessed in words: “When I was in the beneath-place”, says Isobel, “it was stories that got me through. Stories had brought me home” (147).

6 The diversification of the field of YA literature is a gradually emerging process, as new texts are beginning to capture the spectrum of diversity that characterizes the 21st century. Yet the representation and *celebration* of diversity in texts for young adults remains largely unfulfilled within the YA literary market. Navigating past and ongoing injustice and coming to terms with issues like, in this case, the stolen generations in Australia, remains a vital future task for literature for young adults.

7 It is in this precarious context of absences, blind-spots and silences that *Catching Teller Crow* hits home and impacts in the cultural landscape of Australian YA literature and fantasy/speculative fiction more broadly. Its vital contribution in foregrounding the power, resilience, love, strength and compassion of three Aboriginal teenage girls is the call to never forget the atrocities of colonialism, and racist Indigenous policies in Australia, and to celebrate the resilience of the oldest living culture on planet earth. The year 2018 marked the conclusion of the World War I centenary – Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina’s YA novel, published in the same year, offers a lasting “lest we forget!” to the commemoration and celebration of Indigenous children, teenagers and young adults.