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# Are You Talking to Me? Hailing the Reader in Indigenous Children's Literature

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Indigenous-authored children's books are frequently subjected to a non-Indigenous gaze in both their production (editing, design and so on) and reception. The texts discussed here address their many readers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, child and adult, using various techniques. The paratexts in particular address readers and claim their attention in a variety of ways. This paper is an analysis of two Indigenous authored children's books, *My Girragundji* by Meme McDonald and Boori Pryor and *Tell me why* by Robyn Templeton and Sarah Jackson. The first part of the analysis looks closely at *Tell me why*, and explores critical strategy to the approaches taken within the text. Boori Pryor's and Meme McDonald's *My Girragundji* is the second text analysed, exploring issues of audience address and textual authorisation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the political repercussions of the role of paratexts in Indigenous children's books, and the ways in which these contribute to how the imagined reader perceives the role of both text and author.

Paratext is a concept originating with Gerard Genette (1997) in his book *Paratexts*. Genette is a narratologist, and his work reflects a tendency to try and quantify every element of the book (or the work as Barthes would say) as well as the text. He defines paratext as both peritext and epitext, material that comes both before and after the text. Paratexts would include such things as the blurb, introductions, forewords, acknowledgements, titles, cover art, design and so on. While Genette goes into immense detail about the history and traditions of each kind of paratext, the underlying concept is more important to this analysis. Material that frames the narration and informs the reader how to read the book is the most important and basic function of the paratext. As Genette suggests with his title in French, *Seuils* (Thresholds) the paratext is the doorway through which the narration is reached.

How the text interpellates the reader is one of the key tasks of the paratext, especially in books written by Indigenous authors. There is a long history of complicated paratextual elements in Indigenous authored children's works – traditionally paratexts written by non-Indigenous specialists, editors or authors mediating between the work and an (assumed) non-Indigenous audience. There is quite a bit of work being done in this area looking at paratext

in African works published in French, African-American works and in the *testimonio* genre of South American writing; for example Beth McCoy's (2005) 'Paratext, Citation, and Academic Desire in Ishamel Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*'. These articles address the way in which Western 'experts' use paratext as a way of mediating between the author or text and the audience through writing introductions, glossaries and so on. That this can be done as a way of maintaining control over the Other by the dominant textual culture, as well as a way of claiming knowledge and power for the individual 'expert' can be seen in such Australian texts as Mary Durack's introduction to Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling*, as well as in examples from other countries.

Margaret McDonnell (2004) has used this key idea of paratext (also described in her dissertation as 'marginalia') to look at different voices and discourses that are present in published texts written by Indigenous authors, but edited by non-Indigenous editors. She comments that:

*in most instances, the stories these women wish to tell and the ways in which they wish to tell them are mediated through a system which has, over time, perpetuated the very representations that life writing seeks to address.*

(McDonnell 2004 p. 3)

The paratext is one way in which non-Indigenous editors have traditionally framed the writing of Indigenous authors in a context or form that non-Indigenous readers can recognise. Thinking about paratext allows the reader to address these political issues. Within the glossaries, introductions, blurbs, author-photographs, biographical information and so on is material that is separate-to but engaged-with the narration within the text. Traditionally many of these have been written by non-Indigenous editors or so-called 'experts', who choose to frame the narrative in particular ways, frequently for a non-Indigenous audience.

Incidentally both McDonnell and Genette discuss illustration as part of the paratext rather than as intrinsic to the narration, but when looking at children's literature this is clearly a problem. While the author and illustrator are often separate people (and even when the same person



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may be described as separate functions) both are intrinsic to any possible reading of the narrative in picture books. The written text should not be privileged over visual language in picture books generally, but in some Indigenous stories the visual language represents a particularly important thread of both narrative and symbolic meaning. To regard the visual, then, as paratext, would be to ignore a substantial part of the meaning of the text, and the ways in which readers are addressed by the texts.

The paratexts of Indigenous children's books tend to be quite complex. As well as the familiar paratextual elements such as titles, ISBNs, award stickers and author names they may include such things as information on the authors illustrators and traditional owners of the stories. Other information may be included within glossaries of non English terms, dedications, introductions and acknowledgements. These elements can be quite different to those found within and around non-Indigenous authored works, both in terms of content and in terms of the proximity to other elements of the text.

This complexity itself, I would argue, is evidence of an approach to both audience and authorship that recognises different relationships between author, reader and other agents within the production process. These paratextual elements frequently give evidence to the many discourses active within the fields of Indigenous children's literature and publishing. Research into these discourses and the practices arising from them provides the main impetus of the PhD research that has informed this paper. While this article is too short to pursue the questions of these discourses, questions about them have led to the approaches here. The thesis generally is concerned with how Indigenous authored and illustrated narratives become published works through the process of editing and publication.

Reading paratexts can be approached quite formally. The paratextual elements of a book can be quite informative about genre, for example. The intention of this paper, however, is to address who the text (or the producers of the text) perceive as the readers. This is quite a political choice, and one that is not necessarily immediately explicit. Assumptions about audience can disclose a good deal about who the publisher or editor (or author) thinks are

'readers', and can act as a key into understanding the ways in which characters are described, whether a culture is seen as normative or Other and how the author is described in the paratext. By addressing different readers in different ways, the text can often show who has been in control of the process of production, and whose voice has power in the production relationship.

The concept of interpellation is another way of looking at who the intended audience of a text might be. Defining 'interpellation' more generally than Althusser uses it, and not in quite the way that postcolonialists such as Spivak but rather as the simple process of hailing the reader ensures that the concept is a useful one. Althusser is concerned, of course, with the state's ability to address the subject. The 'hey you' of a police officer to a subject who recognises themselves as the person addressed, under the authority of the state, is the classic Althusserian example of interpellation. Spivak uses it slightly differently, in which the subject is addressed as the colonised other by the colonial power, whether represented officially or through the discourse used within an utterance or a text. Spivak (2004) also uses it to signify that moment of recognition a reader feels, she says she is 'interpellated as a New Yorker', for instance. This process of the recognition of the self as part of a group may be important in this context. The hailing paratext must then be seen to both define the group itself, that is, the thing that individual members have in common, as well as recognising the individual's membership within that group. In the context of the multiple and cross-cultural readers of Indigenous authored children's books these groupings may be important indications of how the text is to be read, which takes returns to the idea of paratext as an important sign of authorisation about a text.

The texts by Indigenous authors are not attempting to exert oppressive authority over their readers or to exclude any particular readers; the question is rather how they are interpellating the reader in a way in which the reader can recognise the mode of address. How, then, do texts name the type of reader they seek?

By pulling apart the different elements of the text using Genette's model, in a somewhat rudimentary fashion at this stage of the research, different methods of hailing,

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and different approaches to the potential readers can be identified, or at the very least, questions can be asked about the potential readers. Paratext, as Genette describes it, is rather less burdened by politics than the narrative (McCoy, 2006). McCoy argues, however, that paratexts where there is a cross cultural communication, particularly between a colonised author and their audience, can carry an immense amount of political weight. While paratexts have in the past been written by non-Indigenous editors or commentators, more recent texts tend to have paratexts written by the Indigenous author, or by other Indigenous stakeholders in the texts production. The expectation remains, however, that the text or the author requires some mediation between the narration and the potential readers.

The cover of *Tell me why* reproduces an illustration from page 18 of the text, and shows three of the characters framed by Aboriginal art, looking onto a distant scene of people camping and fishing in a broad landscape. The title is superimposed over the landscape, with the names of the authors (also representing characters within the narration) underneath. The back cover reproduces an illustration representing Sarah's interest, with the blurb, 'Hi, my name is Sarah. I want to tell you a story about the time I asked my grandmother, Nana Mac, a very important question. I was seven years old'. This address introduces the reader to both the narrator and author, as well as giving the context in which the story should be read – it's very important and answers a question. The book also carries the Magabala Books imprint and a bar code, which aligns the book both with certain industrial production practices and economies, as well as addressing certain readers who have experience of Magabala Book's publishing strategies.

The end pages carry a larger detail of the illustration from the back cover and again draw attention to the character Sarah's preoccupations and interests with small illustrations of her toys and some of the motifs from throughout the book. The illustrator, Robyn Templeton, is the mother of the author Sarah Jackson, and thus stands in as the mother of the character 'Sarah' within the text. The facing page carries dedications to the immediate family of the authors (who are also characters within the text), and to the Stolen Generations children. These, then, are the first audience for the text – an immediate and concrete example of those

who have told the story now receiving the story. In earlier books written by Indigenous authors the convention was for the assumed audience to be white.

The title page again reproduces the image from the front cover, backed by the publishing details of the book, which are intended to be used by booksellers, distributors, librarians, researchers and the like, and which may also be of interest to bibliophiles obsessed with minutiae (who can be either children or adults). Decoding this information is extremely important for some readers, although its relationship to the narration may be irrelevant for those listed here as the target audience – 'For 5-9 year olds.' This publishing information also includes details about the funding arrangements of Magabala Books, which is usual in the case of books that have received sponsorship or government funding. One hardly expects to find details about the publisher's share holders, government funding is seen as important to be disclosed, even if the only audience for this kind of paratextual information is the project officer who manages the grant acquittals of the publishing house. This page is somewhat drawn into the context of the rest of the book by the inclusion of a small drawing of a turtle in the corner of the page, an image that recurs several times on different pages.

There are already three distinct audiences for the book, though, well before the narrative begins. The book is expected to answer a serious question for primary school aged children, to be read by members of the Stolen Generation and prove itself as valuable to various government bodies which make choices about the value of some narratives over others.

Notes on the authors are included on page one, which is the page often reserved for the beginning of the narrative. This has the effect of introducing the authors as characters within the story, appropriately as this is indeed an autobiographical work. The positioning of this information does, however, challenge genre conventions, and assumes that the audience who would normally be interested only in reading the story itself will need the author information in order to make sense of this narrative.

Sarah Jackson's note begins with a paragraph that seems aimed at children, specifically 'To kids out there who feel

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the same as me'. She offers a précis of the narration, and conveys the 'message' of the book, 'don't be afraid to ask questions about your culture and story. I am proud of my family background.'

Robyn Templeton, Jackson's mother, also offers a summary of the story, in more detailed and adult terms, and more about the stories of her great-grandmother and grandmother's stories. Templeton's address is at a remove from Jackson's, but she finishes with the words, 'Our stories live on through the lives of our children', suggesting that her imagined audience is of other adults with children (or potential children) of their own, or the community generally who can be seen to be split into adults (Templeton's audience for the more sophisticated version of the *Stolen Generations* story) and children (Jackson's audience for the character Sarah's story).

Genette's suggestion that the primary task of paratext is for the author to inform the reader how to best read the work can be seen explicitly in these paragraphs, but perhaps not as directly as Genette represented the process. Rather than the author being able to state clearly the intention of the work, the process of reading the paratext shows different discourses at work in the text and in the process of production.

Where the paratext of *Tell me why* is directly concerned with addressing the potential reader and framing the narrative as important to particular audiences, the paratext of *My Girragundji* is much more concerned with authorisation in a formal sense. Awards won, qualifications held and permissions from Pryor's extended family are explicitly dealt with. This formal material, then, is addressed to an Indigenous audience (most likely adults) who can read the family connections and the cultural history of the text through permissions and connections formally explained in the Acknowledgements, 'How *My Girragundji* was written' and the notes on the authors. The relationships that are assumed and implied in the narration are made explicit in the paratext – but not necessarily for a child-reader.

The other audience addressed explicitly by the paratext is the audience made up of gatekeepers (who may or may not be Indigenous Australians). These are the adults that choose books for schools, libraries, set texts and so on.

The most prominent of the paratexts is the front cover with its title and author information, and in this case the book is stickered boldly with the Children's Book Council of Australia gold sticker. In awarding *My Girragundji* the younger readers' book of the year prize in 1999 the CBCA has made an announcement about the *value* of the book. This value is both cultural and symbolic, and the very presence of the sticker ensures that these forms of capital will also be transformed into economic value, although this may not be the main aim of the CBCA judging panel. The award also emphasises the audience. This book is, according to the prize, the best for *younger* readers. Only those who are familiar with CBCA practices, categories and judging processes can fully decode this information on the sticker. Others can recognise a general signification of 'quality', much like a medal on a wine bottle, but the specifics of the prize may be lost. For booksellers and publishers, however, the sticker signifies a much greater sales potential than other Australian children's books might be expected to carry – although these stakeholders in the book production process are usually not thought of as audiences or readers of texts and only usually engaged in the transfer of economic value of books, rather than the other forms of cultural value of texts.

Meme McDonald, as one of the authors of the book, introduces herself as the person who wrote down the stories and began the process towards publication. The author notes are placed at the back of *My Girragundji* in contrast the up-front placement of Templeton's and Jackson's notes at the beginning of the narrative in *Tell me why*. McDonald also introduces herself and her daughter Grace as the first audiences for the stories, in oral form, as told by Boori Pryor. This acknowledgement of the author as reader or audience is often made in books written in collaboration with Indigenous authors, or where a non-Indigenous editor has worked on the text (especially in women's life writing). It places McDonald in the position of the non-Indigenous mediator of the text, but the material at the end of the book attempts to place her not as the white specialist, but as collaborator and listener. By placing the notes at the end it distances the author from the material. The narrative of *My Girragundji* is presented at one remove from the authors, rather than as directed by and inhabited by the

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authors' personas. While the characters within the book share some characteristics with the authors (and with the authors' family), this book is presented as fiction not autobiography. The audience of the narrative is not assumed to be the same as the audience for the paratext.

These examples of the different implied audiences from the paratext might seem mundane. Many of us assume multiple audiences for texts, after all, and the producers of texts and those associated with their distribution are certainly aware that the buyers of books need to be attracted as much (or more) than the child or young adult reader. But it is worth noting where the address to different audiences occurs within texts and associated paratexts, and how the work and the authors are presented as *authorised*, that is culturally recognisable as an *author*, someone who owns both the information of the narrative (in itself a complex issue of ownership, authorship and audience relationship within Indigenous cultural production), and who also owns enough cultural capital in all of the fields within which the book will be available to have both credibility and saleability. For the author to be seen as in control of the information within the text, not just as the producer of the narrative, but also as the agent in control of the way in which the narrative is framed, is a major change in the production of Indigenous children's literature. For this to be the case, the relationship between the text and the reader must be seen as a function of the author's *authority*, rather than depending on the authority of the non-Indigenous 'expert'. The signs of this process of authorisation can be seen in both the way the texts interpellate their readers through the paratext, and in the authorship and positioning of the paratext generally.

Readers begin to de-code the paratext even before they begin to pick up the book. If they do not recognise themselves in the address, the narration, with its own complex way of addressing the reading subject, remains silent. Indigenous texts, it seems, never have the luxury of assuming an audience. They must repeatedly address potential readers, surrounding the text with explanations, contexts and instructions. This process is worth exploring, both in the historical context of paratexts written by non-Indigenous writers, and in the context of how these

Indigenous authored texts overcome the difficulties of addressing their audiences.

Genette might have considered the study of paratext to be important for reasons of structure or form. For writers establishing new traditions of literature, however, the paratext is indeed a threshold. To read the paratext offers an entry point, one that in the past has been policed by non-Indigenous writers, editors and scholars. The publishing of Indigenous children's literature has now reached a point where the paratext, often signifying the direct voice of the author, can hail readers without this mediation. The paratext can interpellate the reader, not as under the authority of the author, but as a recognised agent with a relationship to the text. (McDonnell 2004)



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### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Penelope Davie is a PhD student at the Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests include Indigenous Australian children's literature, the children's book industry and children's fantasy literature. Penelope writes a weekly column on children's and YA books for the 'Courier-Mail' newspaper, and has a background as a bookseller.

