

Chinna, Nandi and Poelina, Anne. *Tossed Up by the Beak of a Cormorant: Poems of Martuwarra Fitzroy River*, Perth: Fremantle Press, 2024; paperback, pp. 112, RRP \$29.99; ISBN 9781760992804.

In Nandi Chinna and Anne Poelina's *Tossed Up By the Beak of a Cormorant: poems of Martuwarra Fitzroy River*, the authors demonstrate the capacity of creative work to meaningfully and relationally engage with place and people. Framed as a three-way conversation between the Martuwarra, Poelina, and Chinna, the book emphasises the benefit of dialogic processes to engage with and deeply understand environments, and the related crises induced by human actions. Moreover, it is a call to action for environmental preservation and sustainability.

The book opens with an introduction, first by Poelina, a Nyikina Warrwa Elder, Professor, and Guardian of Martuwarra Fitzroy River, directed specifically to Nandi Chinna but ultimately also the reader. She grounds us in Indigenous knowledge, values, and priorities while encouraging Chinna to engage in a dialogic process of deep listening, stating, 'You need to form your own relationship with the River as a living system. You need to start talking to the River, and then there is a waiting time. Wait and it will communicate with you' (8).

Chinna – a research consultant, community arts facilitator, and writer of four poetry collections – brings forth her own cultural context in her introduction titled 'Blind and Dumb in the Martuwarra.' She asserts how white people are blindfolded by Western colonialism – including English constructions of place, language, and culture – thus they struggle to engage with First Nations people. She encourages the reader to 'Forget the language you have learned since you were a child' (9), to step back and listen, despite the discomfort in doing so. Chinna has a background in cross-cultural collaborative projects, previously working with First Nations peoples to produce poetry collections on ecosystems, homelands, rivers and wetlands. Now she aims in this book to inform the public of the real and oncoming threats against Martuwarra, namely of 'pastoralists wanting to extract water, thereby disrupting and damaging the unique ecosystem' (12). This introduction positions the authors in their respective contexts – indigenous and colonialist – thus encouraging an openness to the subject and aims of the book.

The first poem of the collection, *Martuwarra Time*, written by Poelina, is delineated by a difference in format, style, and length to those of Chinna's. Here, Poelina elaborates on her introduction, discussing the notion of First Law, or 'living waters, living free' (15), in which she advocates for holistic natural laws in the management and balance of life. In parts she utilises interconnection and relationality by channelling the River, speaking with its voice, to persuasively make a call to action:

Nandi, I know you hear me, you feel me, I feel you too
 Write these words down and Dream me to you and we wait for the wet to come
 Tell the city people about me, tell them to stand and come
 There are secrets here, I am the largest registered Aboriginal cultural heritage site
 We have been promised never again, I am fearful of ecocide and genocide we will
 become (17).

Chinna's poems form the majority of the book, and guide the reader through her two-year journey at Martuwarra toward mutual understanding with the environment. Her first poem, *At Danggu*, playfully leads the reader through an evolutionary transformation of the self as she is exposed to the River, 'I'm one cell > then two >> >>' and 'I crane my neck and look up / into my own beginning' (19). The first half of the collection is a sensory explosion with rich descriptions of place – 'weeping paperbark' (23), lightning as 'blinding scars' (30), 'weedy river grass meadows' (27), and the River:

Martuwarra croons in her rumbled bed
 almost like sleep, or a fragment of reverie
 almost like a dream yet to be dreamt. (22)

Through these early poems, Chinna explores the awkward beginnings of a relationship with the River: '*I love you* I mutter in blunt English and feel embarrassed/ until I begin to comprehend that I need to be quiet' (33). Like Poelina, she emphasises the necessity of listening, as it allows for deep, meaningful connection to place and growth within oneself. Although this is a universally beneficial message, both writers address a white audience, perceiving an urgent need to developing deep listening skills.

Chinna's journey and the underlying environmentalist messaging is further supported with a follow-up poem by Poelina. She references devastating colonial environment management projects around the world, powerfully demonstrating the likely impact on Martuwarra if governments and pastoralists continue with their plans. In addition, she asks white Australians to stand with the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, striving for 'Cooperation, not conflict. Unity not divide and conquer / Collaboration, not manipulation, cultural synthesis, not cultural invasion' (56).

Subsequently, a mood shift occurs in Chinna's works, beginning with *In the long hours of the night*, in which she ponders, 'how many of us are lying awake / mourning for rivers that no longer flow' (58). There is an energy of vulnerability and an emotional urgency of 'What can we do?' (72). The sombre mood continues as Chinna shifts back and forth between living her everyday, 'Coles with Mum / pushing our trolleys' (64), and her concerns for the River, continuing to emphasise relationality between people and environment:

Yesterday we talked about rivers,
 how the river would miss its people
 if they were gone, how the people
 would grieve and long for the river (75).

The urgency for environmental preservation surges in the final poems as the journey passes into a new year and Martuwarra floods. Chinna utilises running sentences and paragraphs with little punctuation to evoke confusion:

there are no hierarchies
 brown whorls have eaten that
 laved path an untrackable scent
 we don't know where to place
 our feet mud enters our marrow (88).

Whereas Poelina expresses her fears of ecocide due to governments' lack of listening, knowledge of Country being ignored and Aboriginal voices being muted through bold letters and capitalisation, such as 'Fitzroy River Crossing bridge collapsing, emergency services / **COME QUICKLY**' (92), and exclamations like 'Climate change is real, people / [...] Why is it so hard to see with our ears? / Listen with our eyes!' (93). Through such expressed urgency, the reader is filled with a strong sense of empathy and is emboldened with a need for action, to respond to the crisis in swift yet thoughtful ways.

Chinna argues that 'art making is an ethical act' (11), one which ruptures narratives, including personal and white Western colonialist socio-cultural narratives of belonging and alienation. Through this poetic journey, the reader is situated in two distinct perspectives while following Chinna's evolution of self and mutual understanding. *Tossed Up By the Beak of a Cormorant* is an energetic read, with reflective pauses through Poelina's persuasive pieces.

A glossary at the back explains terms and concepts used by both Poelina and Chinna, including Nyikina words, and particularly various Aboriginal names for places, some specific to the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and others more widely used such as 'Dreaming.' Martuwarra has had a fair amount of coverage in academic research works, focusing on areas of environmental and eco-system management, particularly waterways, with Poelina co-writing much of these. However, few creative literary works have been published about the River, making *Tossed Up By the Beak of a Cormorant* a much needed and unique entry in West Australian poetry.

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