

Treading Lightly by Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe

This is an important book for two reasons. First, it explores a sustainable way of living in Australia, based on the case study of Nhunggabarra people from north-west NSW. Australian Aboriginal society may have been dismissed as primitive by Europeans, but Australians can learn important lessons about learning to live with the Australian environment. Second, it reveals the hidden knowledge of their culture; hidden, because there has been little effort to see Australia from the indigenous worldview.

The Introduction reminds me of the start of Jared Diamond's book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, because it also poses a question. One of the authors, Sveiby, asks the other, "What is the word for knowledge in your Aboriginal language?" 'Yali's question' in Diamond's book becomes Sveiby's. Tex Skuthorpe's answer is surprising: "Our land is our knowledge ... We don't need a word for knowledge."

Immediately, the reader is reminded of the contrasting worldviews of indigenous and European cultures. The European mind-set is different, and we must be prepared to see other possible worlds to our own. The world is really made up of many possible worlds.

The authors use stories of the Nhunggabarra to illustrate the very different indigenous worldview. Aboriginal myths are often read nowadays as children's stories, but there are levels of meaning which go far deeper in knowledge and understanding. For example, 'The Crane and the Crow', like all Nhunggabarra stories, has four levels of meaning. These are illustrated in paintings reproduced in colour and black-and-white. The meaning of the first level explains simply why the crow turned from white to black, and why the crane croaks. Other levels of meaning are never told explicitly. The listener must work out the meaning as part of their education. Level four is the deepest meaning. It concerns spiritual and psychic skills, taught by the wiringin or 'clever man'. It is not accessible to many people of the same culture; unknowable to another culture. One section of the book describes breakthrough and intangible inventions. The boomerang is a breakthrough invention, a cultural icon which continues to be used in texts like advertising because it is distinctive and clever. Multi-layered storytelling is an intangible invention. Many Aboriginal inventions are intangible. Europeans wrongly concluded that a lack of material goods, artifacts, meant that Aboriginal Australians were a primitive culture. They did not consider that Aboriginal knowledge of Australia, accumulated over tens of thousands of years of living here, must be much greater than theirs.

I read this book while I was in Darwin attending the national English and Literacy conference. Stories are read in many different ways depending on the reader or listener. Critical literacy draws attention to decoding texts in order to make meaning of them. Discovering the four levels of meaning in Aboriginal myths in *Treading Lightly* is a timely reminder that there is much more to stories than readers assume. It is strongly recommended to all teachers, not just English teachers. There are extensive reading and research notes, glossary and references at the end of the book, which encourage further reading.

The spiritual realm plumbs depths of knowledge that are the most significant in any culture. Australians have been slow to realize this aspect of their nationhood. Reading this book reminds us of how little we really know about our own country. One small example: the Jabiru Stork, now associated with the wetlands of Kakadu. It used to extend down the east coast. Its former habitat has been replaced by farmland and cities. Crops like sugar cane also led to the introduction of other exotic life – like the cane toad which is now overrunning Kakadu. It is essential that we all become better informed about the land we inhabit, and about the wisdom of Indigenous Australians, if we want to avoid destroying it.

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