

JEANIE ADAMS

The Story Teller

It's hard to get published these days, and much easier to get lost in your own ink fantasy. Award winning children's book writer and illustrator, Jeanie Adams, explains to Nicole Sanderson that the publishing venture, 'Black Ink Press' that she has set up with Indigenous organisation CCDEU Ltd., is designed to fill the niche gaps on bookshelves today, and encourage emerging writers and illustrators in the Indigenous community to create contemporary illustrated books, especially for young readers.

Recently returning from the dry salt-pan region of Normanton, from a mission to unearth raw and undeveloped talent, Jeanie feels that it's moments like walking into the local school library that reassures her she's making a difference. "In a town where perhaps 80 percent of the kids at school are black, probably less than two percent of the books on the library shelf feature black kids as the heroes. Instead, all the characters are white. It's hard for kids to find themselves there in the books." I reflect on my own childhood reading experiences and remember how I found it easier to identify with a character if she had any similar traits to myself like hair colour, age, name or experience. I even remember dad pointing out characters that resembled myself, just to lure me into the book. He'd say; "Look it's you Cole-Pole," ... and it worked, I became an avid reader.

Jeanie remembers when she first noticed the 'bookshelf gap'. She was posted to Aurukun, an Aboriginal community on the western stretch of Cape York Peninsula with her young family. It was a place of red bauxite dirt, virgin beaches, and a small isolated town. There they lived for nine years and brought their three boys up learning the Wik-Mungkan language, fishing at spots where the barramundi would literally jump on their lines, and often their kitchen would be an open fire on the beach. It was a simple and unforgettable life for Jeanie. She and husband John went there as community development workers. "We were in Victoria back in 1976, a time when the churches still ran the Aboriginal missions, and my husband was a Uniting Church minister assigned to help develop the community of Aurukun. Shortly after, it was taken over by the government, and we stayed on as community development workers. My main role was craft advisor, involving the nurturing of local traditional artists to market their wares Australia-wide. But most importantly, it was about encouraging important cultural activity, and nurturing their talents."



Now back in Townsville, Jeanie's role as Co-ordinator of Black Ink Press is full time. Based behind Shalom College in Thuringowa, the not-for-profit community publishing company started out with workshops, and through Queensland Government funding, Jeanie was able to bring on board a project facilitator, Bernadette Boscacci. As a published writer and illustrator, Jeanie is now turning her own creative energy into mentoring emerging Indigenous writers and illustrators, and is about to take it one step further by publishing bilingual stories through books and CDs. She reflects on her own frustrating experiences of getting published, but admits how back in 1990 it was easier, and you could approach the publisher direct, instead of being re-routed through an agent.

"I took my first story to a publisher with some drawings and paintings. They said they would like someone else to illustrate it but I was determined to be the illustrator." This same book, 'Pigs and Honey' won the Australian junior picture book of the year in 1990, and is stocked in most libraries throughout the country. It has just been reprinted.

Jeanie finds that most Indigenous artists don't have the confidence to approach publishers (let alone agents) with their work. But she feels that books are important in educating people and

maintaining a culture. "There are a lot of barriers and constraints for writers/illustrators ... lack of knowledge, or just not knowing where to start. The problem with publishing is that the big companies only publish materials for commercial reasons, so it becomes hard to make it when you're writing for a niche market. But even though we write up a contract and give any royalties directly to the artist, these people don't write for money. Their main goal is just an opportunity to share their stories and give the kids something to read." CL

For more info see www.blackinkpress.com.au

THINK INSURANCE... THINK JOE VELLA
INSURANCE BROKERS

For every insurance need, personal or business, we can help.

JOE VELLA
INSURANCE BROKERS PTY LTD
AWARDED BROKER OF THE YEAR - CAIRNS-DISTRICT

INSURANCE HOTLINE
1300 937 111

www.jvib.com.au