

TO
HOLD
THE
CLOUDS
—
EMERGING
WRITERS
FROM
PERTH

The Centre for Stories respectfully acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land where we are based—the Whadjuk Noongar people. We thank the country and its Elders for their care, resilience, love, labour, and insight. Without them, *To Hold the Clouds* would not have been possible.



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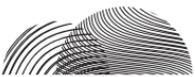
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Introduction

Robert Wood

To write about what matters is to write about the heart and its place in the world, from our chest to other people's, from this side of the coast to the centre of a continent we have feeling for. It is to include what is important, to speak of what counts, and to consider how we have come to be here, in this language, on this plain, from the valley and holding the clouds. This is a book about that, about the very things that make us feel like we belong, in words and on pages, and with the representations of our homes as they emerge from our souls.

That means recognising this place as it is expressed in sovereignties that are old and ongoing, from Whadjuk Noongar Elders in the past, present, and future. That has meant allowing ourselves to be led by traditional owners in their knowledge of country, to hear these stories and these ways of going on, in the face of pouring rain or dogged heat or thick fog rolling along. The day becomes true when we see it for what it is, when we realise that the ancestors and the spirits and the people will come to look after us when we have given up hope. Stories help us in that, stories help us see what matters, and to do as much is to recognise Elders and how

they guide us in the face of doubt. That is why inclusion matters as much as anything else.

To Hold the Clouds comes from a mentoring and hot desk project called Inclusion Matters, run by the Centre for Stories from 2019 to 2020. It focused on emerging writers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and emphasised the short story among a range of literary forms. This was an approach that allowed us to celebrate what it means to be different, to deviate from the standard, to approach a new normal with stomachs full of kangaroo, ghee, and ash. We revelled in the community we created, taking the page as a way to distinguish forms of life that are unique to us. We were opening up our writing from an embodied togetherness that touched the sky as it was filled with stars.

To write out of this, to create with a sense of collective purpose, suggests that we can respect, cherish, and even love, that which is not ours. This is about the value of the other. Yet, it is also about how we are in a family of resemblance that understands what it is to resist and go on, to persist as the commute home takes longer than ever before, to remember that the structures of power were not often designed by us, not here. This is about how we succeed, together. It is a new home where everyone can belong, not just the powerful or the wealthy or the entitled. Inclusion matters, then, because it is about us, by us, and for us, just like *To Hold the Clouds* itself.

There are Yamatji and Iranian and Indian and Greek and Latino and Chinese and Indonesian and Mauritian and Zimbabwean writers here. There are others too. These are labels that designate our passports and our places, of how we speak to the world and the nation as it can make us legible. We have other ways to belong to this city with overlapping stories of migration. We embrace a polytheistic reality like tortoises stacked on other tortoises all the way down to the pits of hell and all the way up to where the gods dwell. This means slowly racing the hares until we cross a finish line somewhere beyond the black stump, somewhere beyond the end of the world, somewhere we will get to, one day, all going well.

Inclusion Matters helped us make sense of all that because it was a refraction of a reality that lived inside of us, which we articulated with the help of mentors that shared this space, that gave our hopes and dreams and fears a way to come out. The mentors that have guided this project are able to craft their words in a way that inspires us, that helps people emerge like butterflies from chrysalis or like the flowers of a silver princess after *Makuru* or like one wave after another in the Indian Ocean where we live next to.

The writing in this book approaches a place that is a dream then, a kind of utopia that allows us to realise our distinctness, to become who we have always known we are, our deep selves, from past lives to this one, from yesterday to now. There are stories of grief and joy and hope and wonder and sadness and shock and violence and possibility. This is not only about the world, but our lives expressed from inside out. And now, in this outside, we see the people that are around us, those who sustain us, from fellow writers to the readers we meet, to our families and friends and strangers that ask what we do in a bid to become next of kin. Reading these stories is a way to get to know us better.

After all, reading and writing are rare birds that fly through rainbows and see them as colourful bridges to be shared with the homeless and the abused and the disavowed. We cannot forget just what a privilege that truly is, not in this world, not in this lifetime of ours. That is why inclusion matters as we seek to speak, write and be for more than just our selfish selves. This is the paradox that being invested in identity allows—that the more I know about myself, the more I can reach into the heart of someone else, that I can speak best when I know where my tongue sits, from tight against the roof of my mouth or sticking out, touching my chin, with stories on my lips.

This means recognising the writing process, means attending to the possibility that we have ability, that we can craft and imagine and empathise in a way that allows us to develop and nourish and nurture and grow and come to rest someplace else. And, when we get there, we recognise those transcendent words, which we

learnt by respecting the traditional owners here, on this boodjar. That might be what it is to learn and understand, to go on when we were followed by dark clouds that rained on our parade, that meant we forgot what it is to be enlightened, what it is to stand on mountain tops. This book is the result of going on.

To Hold the Clouds is the linguistic expression of a moment of lightning when a fire starts down below, or a fire next time, or a fire that burns the spinifex grass to warm our selves and our family and our lovers, where we smell seeds and resin and myths as they turn to smoke, all of which are there when we look at our reality as closely as we are allowed. We hope you enjoy these words, and think once more about what it is to work to belong in a country such as ours.

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