

## SONG OF THE SHADOW OF A SEED

LUISA MITCHELL

### ABOUT THE BOOK

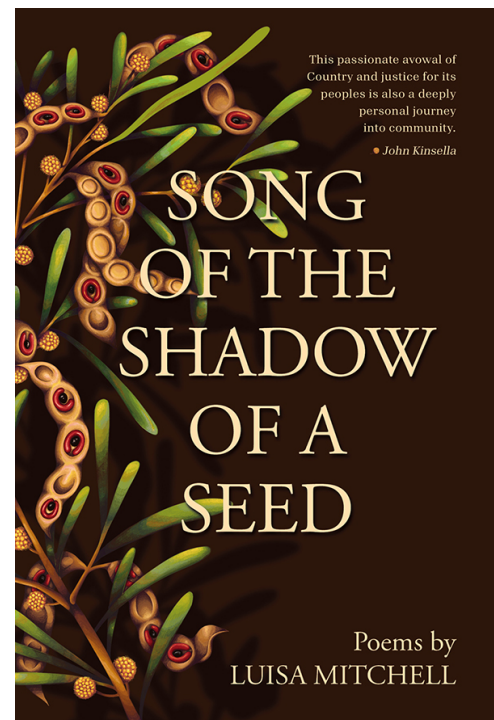
Seeds are sacred. They are the minutiae of all life, along with Boodjar (Country), Beeliar (rivers), women and all bodies and vessels that carry living things. Mitchell's debut collection is divided into different cycles around the life of a seed – elders, memory, language, hunger, burning, flowering, flight – and the poems within reflect the ways in which a seed, a person and a nation can contain the long history of what has been, as well as the promise of what is to come. These poems open conversations about connection to Country, the resilience of culture, and the complex articulation of identity as a First Nations descendant. They are a call to listen, to learn, and to engage with the lived truths of Whadjuk Nyungar Country.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luisa Mitchell (Shaw) was born and raised in Rubibi (Broome). She is a Whadjuk Nyungar poet, screenwriter and arts worker living in her ancestral Country, Boorloo (Perth). She is passionate about helping others to share their stories as a healing and regenerative practice.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this collection called *Song of the Shadow of a Seed*?
2. What is this poet's connection to the natural world (as described 'About the Poems' (pp. 1–3)? What does the author believe plants, trees and nature can teach us as humans?
3. How does the titular poem (p. 4) set up the themes for what is to follow?
4. Which poems in this collection exemplify the statement that 'the personal is political'?
5. What do you think the poet is conveying about First Nations sovereignty in the poems ('Vote for Boodjar' (p. 68); 'The Majority—or conversations during a Referendum' (p. 72); 'Private Rebellions' (p. 76); and 'one day i will wave the flag' (p. 77)?
6. *Song of the Shadow of a Seed* is an example of First Nations truth-telling. Read and discuss examples of truth-telling in the book (e.g., 'Nyittiyung' (p. 22); 'language of a colony' (p. 26); 'Karlup' (p. 24); 'habits of labour' (p. 29); 'unfinished business' (p. 82).
7. What does 'truth-telling' and 'truth-listening' mean to you?
8. How does the poem a 'Tale of Two Families' (p. 34) tell the story of two sides of the same family and challenge stereotypes of Blak and White Australian colonial histories?
9. Do you think it is true to say that this book of poems is as much about connection as it is about disconnection? Which poem connected with you most?
10. Read 'old-growth forest' (p. 6) and 'It Didn't Start with Me' (p. 13) to discuss the science behind our DNA—the idea that certain emotions and traits from our ancestors, like trauma or strength, can be passed down to us. Why do you think the author is tracing her ancestry? What techniques or methods does she use to reconnect with her culture?
11. How is the past still felt in the present? Discuss examples from the book. For example, how has the historical erasure of the author's Nyungar identity and heritage been expressed in this book, and how do these poems suggest that it is felt presently in the poet's life today?
12. Which poem for you carried the greatest sense of hope or hopefulness?
13. Which poem challenged you the most?



14. Read the poems 'to care' (p. 93), 'habits of labour' (p. 29) and 'Invitation to Make a Garden' (p. 96). How do these poems reflect human–nature symbiosis and how does it make you feel about your own role in caring for Country?
15. In what ways are these poems situated in a global context, especially in relation to experiences of colonial violence with other international struggles and communities?
16. How do you think that this poet's work contributes to conversations about national identity and the idea of Australia?

## CREATIVE WRITING PROMPTS

1. Think of a place that you feel very connected to now (like 'camp at walmadany', p.10) or a place significant to your cultural heritage/ancestry, even if you don't feel connected to that place at all (like 'Gingin Fever Dream', p. 79).
  - a. Write a list of words that describe that place in as much detail as possible, using all your senses, even if means having to imagine what those senses might feel like.
  - b. Then turn the list of words into a poem.
2. Write a conversation poem, such as those found in here (see 'Boorloo to Broome', p. 17; 'Mother Versus Riot Police', p. 83). Try writing one with a family member, then a friend, and then someone in your writing group you may not know very well at all.
3. Draw a picture of your favourite tree on a piece of paper. On that tree, write down some words on different parts of the tree:
  - a. the Roots – your ancestors. What key words describe what you know about your ancestors and heritage?
  - b. the Earth – your Country, where you live – your favourite places where you feel connected to Country.
  - c. the Trunk – your interests, skills and strengths.
  - d. the Branches – your hopes and dreams, not just for yourself, but your community also.Write a poem using some or all of the words on your tree. Focus on having the themes and content of the poem match the form.
4. Write a poem from a non-human perspective—a plant, animal, or an imaginary ancestor—who is witnessing you. How do they view you? What do they notice about your life? If you like, play with jumping between multiple perspectives. Explore how different perspectives change what can be communicated in a poem.

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***How did you choose which poems went into this collection? At what point did the idea of the travelling seed become the organising principle?***

When I approached Fremantle Press, I had written about 10 to 15 poems that perhaps unconsciously were reflecting the mental and emotional work I had been doing at the time, reflecting on my ancestors and family history, and my sense of place and responsibility on Nyungar Boodjar. Once these original poems were selected and I was commissioned to write the rest of the book, I realised where my heart was leading me and that I wanted to lean into these themes further. I asked myself: what do I want out of writing this book? And the answer was healing, connection, and truth-telling. With those goals in mind, I set about writing a list of ideas and books I wanted to read. I also had a bunch of poem ideas and one-liners I'd been writing for the last couple years in my Notes app in my phone that I was now finally motivated by a deadline to finish. In the end, I wrote more poems than I needed, so the ones that I cut were usually because they felt disconnected to the overall themes.

The title *Song of the Shadow of a Seed* came to me quite quickly in a moment when I was trying to express the feeling of what I was writing in one line. There was a sense in my poems of feeling invisible, inadequate, uneducated, unalive, and the only way to visualise that was the spiritual notion I felt that before we are born, we are all specks of spirit floating around, waiting to be born and begin a new life. That was how I was feeling,

so small, I was barely the shadow of a seed. I mentioned this title idea to my mum, and all credit to her, she immediately started researching 'seed shadows', which is a real, scientific concept that models how far seeds fall away from their parent plant and in what conditions they thrive in. It was a perfect metaphor to lean into for this book, and I took Mum's idea for the overall structure and ran with it, researching the life cycle of plants, and using this journey of a seed to end the collection on a message of hope and transformation.

### ***Who are the poets that Luisa Mitchell reads?***

Mostly First Nations legends like Charmaine Papertalk Green, Elfie Shiosaki, Jazz Money, Jack Davis, Uncle Alf Taylor but also John Kinsella, Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry. I love listening to or reading the writing of local, emerging poets in our community, like members of the First Nations Writing Group at Centre for Stories.

While writing my collection, I had a lot of fun diving into older, classic poetry and drew ideas from individual poems by Alexander Pope, Emily Dickinson, Allen Ginsburg, William Blake, Jonathon Swift and Andrew Marvell. More recently, I was greatly inspired by *Naag Mountain* (2024) from Manisha Anjali.

### ***Why is truth-telling important? Why is truth-listening important too?***

Truth-telling is important because, if done well, it leads to healing, empowerment and redress for First Nations peoples who are still facing ongoing impacts of colonial violence. The problem is that many of our truths are actually already out there in public and political domains—in our movies, books, paintings, in the countless federal royal commissions and inquiry reports into the 'Aboriginal problem'. Many of the problems that mob are facing have been shared to a large extent, they just haven't been addressed. That's why truth-telling can't effectively occur unless *truth-listening* is given equal attention and focus. Truth-listening ensures First Nations stories are heard in ways that lead to systemic change, adjust power dynamics and give control and self-determination back to our peoples. It means non-Indigenous people take action after hearing those truths, and ensure those acts of colonial violence and their legacies don't happen again.

I think once First Nations are truly heard, then our key message of listen first and foremost to Boodjar, to Country, which Australia has so horrifically destroyed and ignored, will also be achieved. This will lead to Australians totally redefining ourselves and our systems of governance, so that we return to ways of being that live in custodianship and balance with Country and each other.

### ***What do you hope that readers gain from your work?***

I hope readers walk away feeling inspired to explore their own family history and traditional cultures, and through this, build a deeper sense of duty and care to the land on which they live and respect for First Nations Elders and custodians.

### ***What is next for Luisa Mitchell?***

I would like to write another book, and then another one, and so on! I don't feel like poetry is the only genre I will work in. I always dreamt of writing fiction, YA and children's picture books, but perhaps there will be some academic research and non-fiction writing one day too. I'm very passionate about the power of education and I would love to learn some animation skills so I can turn my stories into short films as well.



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