

SONG OF THE SHADOW OF A SEED

LUISA MITCHELL

ISBN (PB): 9781760996451

ISBN (EBOOK): 9781760996468

YEAR LEVEL: 10–12

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.

THEMES

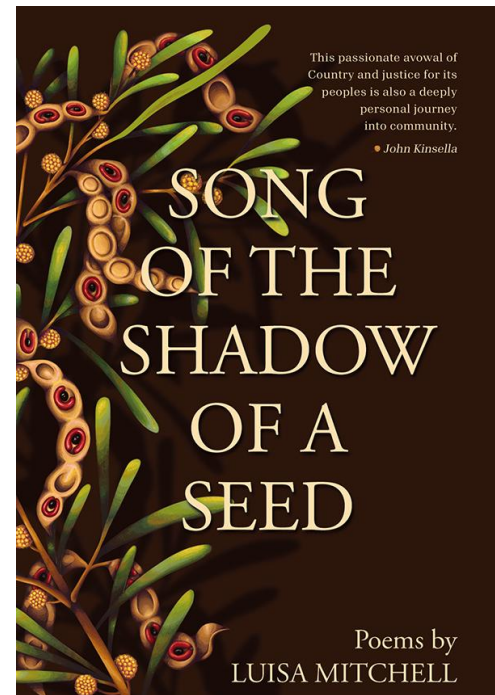
- Family ancestry and heritage
- First Nations cultures
- Reconciliation and truth-telling
- Connection to Country and environmental care
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Politics and social justice

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Year 9 English, Humanities and Social Sciences (History), The Arts
- Year 10 English, Humanities and Social Sciences (History), The Arts
- Year 11 English, Modern History
- Year 12 English, Modern History
- Cross-curriculum priority: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: www.luisamitchell.com
- Author's video: [Our Wellbeing, Our Way: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GapXJEUr5I); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GapXJEUr5I>
- Prompts on [writing 'recipes for change'](https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Recipes-for-life-by-Natale-Rudland-Wood.pdf); <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Recipes-for-life-by-Natale-Rudland-Wood.pdf>
- [Synergies: Walking Together, Belonging Together](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeGqTlDYjQ&t=478s); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeGqTlDYjQ&t=478s>
- Podcast: [Melville Place Names](https://www.can.org.au/arts/artwork/place-names-melville-podcast) (produced by the author); <https://www.can.org.au/arts/artwork/place-names-melville-podcast>
- Article: [A practice of truth-listening](https://antar.org.au/issues/truth-telling/a-practice-of-truth-listening/); <https://antar.org.au/issues/truth-telling/a-practice-of-truth-listening/>
- Article: [Community truth-telling pathways](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/); <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/>



- Article: [Tree of Life writing and drawing prompt; https://nathanbweller.com/tree-life-simple-exercise-reclaiming-identity-direction-life-story/](https://nathanbweller.com/tree-life-simple-exercise-reclaiming-identity-direction-life-story/)
- Video: [Dadirri - listen; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pahz_WBSSdA&t=31s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pahz_WBSSdA&t=31s)
- Website: [Deep Time – ABC stories; https://www.abc.net.au/news/deeptime/time](https://www.abc.net.au/news/deeptime/time)
- Website: [Cockburn – First Contact historical timeline; https://www.cockburn.wa.gov.au/Derbal-Nara/Noongar-Boodjar-\(Country\)/First-Contact-and-Timeline](https://www.cockburn.wa.gov.au/Derbal-Nara/Noongar-Boodjar-(Country)/First-Contact-and-Timeline)
- Documentary Episode: First Inventors on SBS On Demand – [Connected Continent; https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/tv-series/the-first-inventors](https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/tv-series/the-first-inventors)

CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion Questions

1. Pre-reading:
Consider the title, *Song of the Shadow of a Seed*, and the three cover quotes by other authors on the front and back cover pages. What do you think this book is about?
2. During reading:
 - a. Read the first titular poem and imagine the ‘seed’ is the main character in its own story. What journey does the ‘seed’ go on – how does it change? After reading this first poem, predict some of the key themes of this collection.
 - b. Some poems in this book are written from the author’s perspective, other times from a non-human perspective, like a plant or animal, and at other times from an imaginary, historical person’s perspective. Discuss examples of different perspectives you can find in the book. How does writing from imagined perspectives change how we interpret the world? What does this allow the author to communicate in these poems?
 - c. What does the author believe plants, trees and nature can teach us as humans? Refer to a specific poem in the collection as an example.
 - d. Ask students to choose a particular poem and discuss the author’s key message. What metaphors or symbolism does the author use and how does this help convey the key message?
 - e. How can the past still be felt in the present? For example, how has the historical erasure of the author’s Nyungar identity and heritage been expressed in this book, and how is it felt presently in her life today?
 - f. How does the author play with form and visual poetry to express her ideas? Discuss examples: ‘spotlight’ (pg. 9), ‘Tale of Two Families’ (pg. 34), ‘Guildford Legacies’ (pg. 38), ‘she is breathing’ (pg. 53), ‘Black Spot’ (pg. 56), ‘Devotion, or Camp Dog’ (pg. 92).
 - g. Is there a time you felt connected to your cultural heritage or ancestors, or struggled with disconnection? Discuss the various techniques the author uses to reconnect with her culture and ancestry through her poems e.g. archival research, conversation poems with family, imaginary conversations with ancestors.
3. After reading:
 - a. Choose the poem that most resonated with you and the poem you found most challenging to understand, and explain why.

Creative Writing

4. Look at examples of the ‘conversation poems’ in the book to inspire your own collaborative poem. What effect do conversation/collaborative poems have on us as the writers, and on the people who read them?
 - a. In pairs, ask students to think about something that sparked their curiosity, shocked them or made them laugh this week. Each student should then take two minutes to write down whatever came to mind about how that made them feel. Then ask them to swap their books, and in silence, write something beneath and in response to what their partner has just written. Repeat this process once more, until the pairs have created a longer poem or prose piece.
 - b. As a whole class, create a group poem based on a shared experience or emotion, or use a ‘spin the wheel’ topic (e.g., resilience). Have each student write one line. Collate these digitally (use Padlet, Freeform or another digital organiser) and then have students organise the lines into a poem in pairs.

5. Brainstorm examples of hope and hopefulness in the collection – what creates hope for the author? Read 'Recipe for Becoming Kin' (pg. 100) as an example.
 - a. What does 'becoming kin' mean to the author? How is it hopeful?
 - b. Discuss how the poem blends the non-fiction recipe form with creative writing. What effect does this create?
 - c. Breaking students into small groups, ask them to brainstorm their favourite dishes. Then, in a new list, brainstorm things, actions, people or places that make them feel hopeful.
 - d. Together, have the students create their own 'recipes for hope' using their dish of choice as a guide. Give students the option of working collaboratively or independently on this.

6. Luisa's writing takes us to many places, like the beach, rivers, swamps and deserts. Find a place outside to sit with the students (if possible). On a large piece of paper, write out the six senses: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, and spirit (which includes things like intuition, spiritual awareness and non-physical awareness). Choose a poem from the collection, read it aloud and ask the students to identify references to these senses.

Then as a group, choose a setting (e.g., beach, home, camp, bush, shops) and have students say one key word to describe that place. Then go around the circle a second time with each student using one of the six senses to describe their own memories of that place. For example, 'I can smell the fish roasting on the fire'; 'I can hear the wind blowing in the trees'. You may choose to record this and collate a class poem.

The Arts

1. Ask students to sketch their favourite tree with roots going into the ground on a piece of paper in front of them. Then ask them to brainstorm and write descriptive words around different parts of the tree:
 - a) the Roots – your ancestors. Describe key words of 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 for your future.

Ask students to then draft a short memoir or poem using some or all of the words on their tree. Students can then use paints or other materials to create a final artwork depicting what they've written. They may use lines, phrases or words from their writing, or they may choose to have their written piece exist as a companion piece to their artwork.

2. Just as the titular 'seed' of the collection transforms over a series of seven chapters in the collection – growing, flowering and flying away – ask students to choose one poem from the collection and turn it into a seven-panel comic strip or storyboard, demonstrating a character or place transforming. Use this activity to explore story structure and visual storytelling. *Note:* If students storyboard, they can attempt to film their story as an additional activity.

3. Look at the poems 'language of a colony' (pg. 26) and 'cuttings of a guardian' (pg. 33). These poems both take words from other sources to create a new text that criticise those original ideas. Using old magazines or newspapers, encourage the class to build their media literacy by critically reflecting on the articles and questioning the intention, power or biases behind the words. Ask students to create their own collage artwork by cutting out words and images from the magazines that challenge something they don't like about the status quo or criticise something they found in the original magazine. For instance, a magazine ad that shames women's bodies, or a news headline that is aimed at creating division or fear.

Health

1. Watch this video the author wrote and directed on [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GapXJEUrR5I) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GapXJEUrR5I).
 - a) In a circle, discuss the concept of social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and then copying the diagram from the video, map a large SEWB chart as a class on butcher's paper or the whiteboard.

Under the different headings, fill in the chart together by brainstorming real examples of ways the students feel healthy according to these principles.

Discuss traditional First Nations lifestyles and factors that might contribute to the wellbeing of First Nations peoples; then discuss factors that are influencing their health today, and how and why changes have occurred. Read 'How to check you're still alive' (pg. 113) aloud – what factors might be influencing the author's wellbeing in this poem?

- b) *Health influencer poster activity*: splitting students into small groups, ask the groups to choose one SEWB element: connection to body, mind, family, community, culture, Country, or spirituality.

The groups should then find as many examples as possible from Luisa's poems that reflect the element. Note down direct quotes from the chosen poems.

Each group should then design a health 'influencer' poster on their principle, encouraging people to focus on caring for that element in their lives. They may use lines or visual inspiration from their selected poems in *Song of the Shadow of a Seed*.

- c) Read 'Tale of Two Families' (pg. 34) to better understand the author's journey with how differently the two sides of her family, Blak and White, were treated due to their race, specifically in relation to the government's racist policies.

Similar to how the poem is broken into two sides, split the class into two groups. One will study and create a mind-map on various health inequities between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians and how they are linked to historical policies, like the *Aborigines Act 1905 (WA)*.

The other group will study and mind-map examples of traditional First Nations practices that contribute to positive health outcomes (e.g., art and song, living on country, smoking ceremonies) and post-colonial examples of activities or events run by First Nations communities that improved their wellbeing (e.g. the Coolbaroo Club, Wardandji Noongar Festival, Noongar Lullabies, Indigenous ranger programs, art centres, language classes, etc.). As with these examples, encourage students to find examples from the specific First Nations custodians of the area they are living in.

Then have the groups swap topics, so each group addresses a focus area. You may like to have groups collate their findings on post it notes and then conduct a gallery walk.

Science

1. Read the poems 'to care' (pg. 93), 'habits of labour' (pg. 29) and 'Invitation to Make a Garden' (pg. 96). Explain symbiosis — close, long-term ecological interactions between two different species where at least one organism benefits — and find examples of symbiosis in the poems. Explore the three types of symbiotic relationships and brainstorm the benefits they can create. Discuss examples of Indigenous ways of caring for Country (reciprocity, stewardship, burning, etc.) that demonstrate human-nature symbiosis. Organise an on-country walk with a First Nations Elder or community member to learn their ways of caring for Country and mapping symbiosis in real time.
2. Organise a series of outdoor on-Country trips with First Nations Elders and community members. Begin each session with a poetry reading from *Song of the Shadow of a Seed* to ground the students in the space and explore a different scientific concept: seed dispersal, parent plants, seed shadows. On each trip, focus on a different learning element (e.g., collect fallen native seeds and learn the local Indigenous names for the plants and their traditional uses; learn about the deep time journey-ways and movements of First Nations people by tracing the often intentional movement of seeds by people over thousands of years in Australia; listen to an oral history about how particular plants came to grow in a specific area and discuss different types of seed dispersal). Students should keep an observational diary for each session.

Back in the classroom, use the field notes to examine the structure of the seeds the students collected to determine how they disperse (e.g., heavy pods falling, winged seeds float), work with the class to run a seed dispersal craft activity. Ask the students to design, build and test a seed prototype using craft materials to achieve a specific goal: dispersing via wind (farthest distance), water (longest float) or animals (firm attachment). Divide students into small groups to study these different seed dispersal mechanisms and present on the environmental suitability and evolutionary advantages of each type, including notes on First Nations knowledge of specific plant examples from their excursions.

- Partner with local Aboriginal community members or Elders to identify a culturally significant plant and learn about traditional uses of the plant (ideally visit the plant on Country outside of the classroom). Use the local First Nations seasons to identify key moments of the plant's life cycle (e.g., flowering, fruiting). Engage the students with observational activities: students can create 'seed balls' for dispersal, use microscopes to examine the seeds, keep nature journals to track changes in the plant, observe and record pollinators, etc.

In groups, have the students compare the on-Country observations with further study into the plant's life cycle, and then create a poster or digital story, bringing together the stages of growth from First Nations knowledge and the botanical life cycle stages to present to the class.

- The author was studying the science of epigenetics when writing this collection. Read 'old-growth forest' (pg. 6) and 'It Didn't Start with Me' (pg. 13) to discuss the science behind our DNA – these poems explore the idea that certain emotions and traits from our ancestors, like trauma or strengths, can be passed down to us. Describe the structure and role of DNA (genes vs expression) and how epigenetics differs from genetic mutation. Using case studies of epigenetics, explore how environmental factors (e.g. stress or nutrition) can influence gene expression.

In small groups, run a gene expression simulation activity where students receive 'gene cards' (e.g., stress response gene, growth gene); sticky notes that represent methyl groups; and scenario cards (e.g., famine, safe environment, war, supportive family) to explore epigenetic traits like intergenerational trauma or mental illness.

Humanities and Social Sciences

- Identify key historical events, people and places in the book relating to Australian history, particularly in reference to impacts on Aboriginal people, and research these key events/people/places further. For example, who is 'A.O. Neville-the-Devil', referred to in 'Lateral Violence' (pg. 66)? What event is 'Karlup' (pg. 24) referring to (the Galup massacre)?
 - Ask the students to create their own historical timelines using the information they find.
 - Using a different coloured pen or texta, or another sheet of paper, ask the students to research their own family history and overlay these details into the *Song of the Shadow of a Seed* timeline, so that you can visually compare both. Open a class discussion on comparing the different families' experiences in recent history and how past Australian policies and colonisation impacted First Nations people.
- The word 'sovereignty' is mentioned four times throughout the book ('Vote for Boodjar' (pg. 68); 'The Majority—or conversations during a Referendum' (pg. 72); 'Private Rebellions' (pg. 76); and 'one day i will wave the flag' (pg. 77)). Split the students into four groups to discuss each of these poems and research the meaning and examples of First Nations sovereignty. Have each group present a breakdown of their poem and how it developed their understanding of this concept, drawing in other references found through their research.
- Song of the Shadow of a Seed* is an example of First Nations truth-telling and the students reading it are truth-listening. Read and discuss examples of truth-telling in the book (e.g., 'Nyittiyung' (pg. 22); 'language of a colony' (pg. 26); 'Karlup' (pg. 24); 'habits of labour' (pg. 29); 'unfinished business' (pg. 82)) and ask the students to research truth-telling and truth-listening as concepts – what key principles must they involve to be impactful?

- a. Have the students do further research on successful examples of truth-telling and truth-listening. Split them into groups and give them simple, truth-listening requests from First Nations communities to research (e.g., 'We want our experiences to be heard and more visible around town'; 'We want people to start respecting the land'; 'We want our history taught in schools'; and 'We want more power and say in local government').
 - b. Task each group with designing a plan to put on an imaginary local truth-telling and truth-listening program for their community using their specific community's request and then present their program plan ideas back to the class.
4. Read the poems 'Palestine Sounds Like' (pg. 62) and 'Whose Violence?' (pg. 64). Discuss how the author views the connection between Australian First Nations experiences of colonial violence with other international struggles and communities. Ask the students to choose a poem from the collection, identify global connections in it, and write a Global Comparison list between a topic or theme in the poem they chose, and another country outside of Australia. Encourage them to:
- a. Identify the key theme, words or references in the poem that made them choose the country they did, and analyse the author's key message in the poem (e.g., "Quoting James Baldwin in the poem 'yandjet, bulrush, cattails, typha—or reimagining Whiteness' (pg. 70) made me think of the African American struggle for civil rights" or "'Mother Versus Riot Police' (pg. 83) made me think of Iranian 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests.").
 - b. Write a brief summary of the significance of their chosen country and topic, and the original poem – key people, events and its impacts.
 - c. List the similarities and differences between the two topics or countries.



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