

WORLDS WITHIN A WORLD FIRST NATIONS WOMEN SHARE THEIR STORIES EDITED BY CASEY MULDER

ABOUT THE BOOK

This powerful collection, edited by Casey Mulder (Ballardong Noongar), brings together the voices of five First Nations women as they share their life stories: **Carol Foley** (Ballardong Noongar), **Deborah Green** (Yamatji), **Barb Hostalek** (Yawuru Gija / Territorian, Czech and Greek), **Lois May** (Ballardong Noongar) and **Valerie Swift** (Minang Gnudju). Their stories highlight the enduring legacy of the world's oldest living culture, showing how education and connection can transform lives. The honest and wise reflections of these remarkable women provide insight into what it means to grow up as a First Nations woman in the second half of the twentieth century. These are powerful, true stories from descendants of the world's oldest living culture.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Yirga Carol (Coral) Anne Blurton (Foley) was born in Carnarvon, Western Australia. At an early age, she became ill and was placed under the care of the State. She is a proud Yamatji Noongar woman living on Noongar Boodja in Perth. Her life's journey has involved growing up in a non-Aboriginal family and later reconnecting with her Aboriginal family through Welfare and various life experiences.

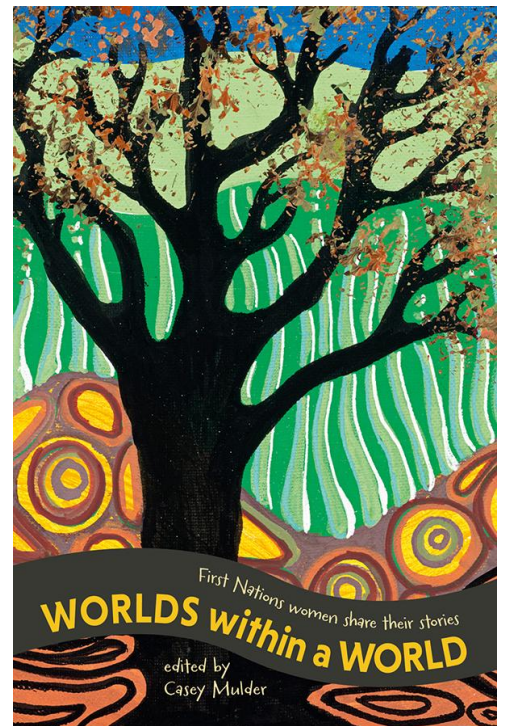
Deborah Green is a Yamatji nyarlu who comes from both the Wajarri and Badimia language groups. Deborah has spent most of her life between the two Western Australian towns of Morawa, where she was proudly born, and Geraldton where she has raised her three sons. Deborah's writing skills were a gift given to her from her ancestors, her old people, to help her do her bit to fight for her people and anyone else affected by the ongoing injustices of colonialism.

Barb Hostalek is Aboriginal Australian, born and raised-up on Larrakia Country, living and creating on moorditj Noongar Country of the south-west of Western Australia. Barb is a playwright who has worked with Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company. Her mainstage premieres include *Cracked* (2015), *Banned* (2016), *Thirst* (2019), *Perpetuity* (2020) and *Beyond* (2021).

Lois May is the fourth eldest of eight children. Her mother's families are Yarran, Bolten, Bennell and Garlett; her father's are Humphrey, Winmar and Turvey. Lois is a mother of four children and grandmother of nine, with four great-grandchildren. She has worked in many non-government organisations, sharing and integrating cultural safety strategies to encourage self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island People in the workplace, and raise awareness for all Australians.

Valerie Swift, a proud Minang Elder, was born at the Gnowangerup Mission Hospital in 1953 on the traditional lands of the Goreng people. A member of the Gray-Knapp family, with extensive family connections across Western Australia and Traditional connections to the Ngadju peoples, Valerie was most recently a co-director of the Djaalinj Waakinj Centre for Ear and Hearing Health Centre, and is Aboriginal cultural advisor for The Kids Research Institute Australia's Wesfarmers Centre of Vaccines & Infectious Diseases in Perth

Editor **Casey Mulder** is a Ballardong Noongar educator, writer and editor from Quairading, WA. She is Director of First Nations Writing and Programs at the Centre for Stories, and also editor of the anthology *Rivers Flow: Reflections on the Songs of Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter* (Fremantle Press, 2025).



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this memoir collection called *Worlds Within a World*?
2. How do you think the title relates to the epigraph at the start of the book from Luisa Mitchell's poem 'old-growth forest'?
3. What year (approximately) was each of the contributors born, and what similarities and differences are there in their life experiences?
4. Which issues and experiences do these women share – i.e. which have endured across the decades of their lived experience?
5. How might the points of commonality reflect a broader social and political framework in Australia in the second half of the twentieth century?
6. What effects of the Stolen Generations are evident in each story?
7. What piece, or which recollection, resonated with you the most, and why?
8. On p. 5, editor Casey Mulder speaks of 'storytelling and yarning as a practice'. What do you think she means by this?
9. What glimpses of Carol Foley's mother do we see in Carol's story? How do you think Carol's mother might have experienced her daughter's foster care?
10. What are the 'worlds within a world' that Carol lives in?
11. What is the impact of Carol reconnecting with her father's family?
12. What do you see as the chief riches and deprivations of Val Swift's childhood? How are your reflections impacted by your own childhood and the worldview of your family of origin?
13. What observations does Val Swift have to make about racism?
14. Why is her story called 'Wirniny Baal'?
15. What does Lois May mean when she says that even if school is just down the road, an Aboriginal child 'might as well have walked one hundred miles' (p. 91)?
16. In what ways does her own life reflect this metaphor?
17. Why do you think that Lois has included the poem 'Bungulla, Bungulla, how I long for these days' in her story (p. 95)?
18. Deborah Green has written her piece from her mother's perspective rather than her own. Why do you think she has chosen to do this?
19. What was the impact of Native Welfare on the life of Deborah Green's mother, and how did it shape what happened to her across decades?
20. What does Deborah have to say about resilience and the survival of her people in the modern era at the story's conclusion (p. 189)?
21. What does the structure of Barb Hostalek's piece tell us about the person who wrote it?
22. For this author, what is the value of education – and what are the many ways that she defines a 'teacher'?
23. What difference do you think it makes to Barb's story that she has included fragments of playscript in it?
24. As you read Barb's piece, which of your educators came to mind and how did they impact your life?
25. If you were to write your own memoir piece, whose style would you emulate from this collection and why? What would two key themes of your own story be?

INTERVIEWS WITH THE AUTHORS

What did you learn from writing your memoir piece?

Barb Hostalek: The opportunity to give memoir writing a go gave me a creative way to think and shape my truth into a story I felt reflected my imagination and lived experiences with integrity and care. I discovered an internal battle with memory, sometimes being selective on moments; at times this was emotionally a calm sea and other times cyclonic. I learned that writing is a powerful way of telling stories and, as an author, choosing moments that reveal deep patterns of humanity is vital in connecting society. I wanted to share the importance of voice, letting present-day insight sit alongside the rawness and at times uncomfortable nature of the past, especially as a collective. I can't stress more, the invaluable nature of writing structure matters: a good hook, scenes, turning points and reflection work together to create momentum. Most of all, memoir isn't

about what happened, but why it mattered—transforming personal experience into something universal, resonant, and human ... reading all the women's stories, this is what *Worlds Within a World* has done.

Valerie Swift: The need to consider others in my life, the where and how they would fit into my story. In retracing my steps, re walking my life journey, I realised my promise that I would try in every way not to pass on the effects of my life traumas onto my children, was done in the best way I could with the resources I had at any given time. My thinking and planning for writing my memoir were always about utilising a strength-based approach so others, especially my children, could take something positive from my story.

It also had me reflecting on the person I have become, regardless of my life experience. Writing this memoir confirmed for me that I have done well enough at life: I can see and feel positive things, I can forgive but not forget, I can love and let be, and for that I am thankful, very thankful for the person I am. I am certain my mum and dad would be so very proud of me.

Carol Foley: I learnt that it is important to tell a story, and to record your life experience, so that the written story becomes a reflection for my children to actually learn about their mother and learn what happened to her. Before this, I felt that my children didn't know my life experiences, so I wanted them to hear it from me and not learn about it from other people. Also, when it comes to the Stolen Generations, I often hear people say, 'That never happened.' And my response is: 'Really? Where did you hear that?' When it comes to being a part of the policies and people of the Stolen Generations, even though it is part of our history, it is not being taught to the wider community. It is basically saying that our lives don't matter, because those things supposedly never happened. So, that means the value of somebody's life experience is nothing. I wanted my children to be able to read and to hear my story, but I also felt that I only wanted certain things to be told, and hopefully I have shared positive life experiences without taking away from the horrible things that happened. Because even though I had a positive upbringing, I missed out on all the life experiences of living with, sharing with and learning from my Aboriginal family.

Deborah Green: I wrote about my mother's life and was only able to do so because I have had an enormous amount of healing in my life. If you are going to write a memoir piece, be prepared, as you will feel emotions that you may not have been aware were there. I hear people say it is a healing process when they write, but for me, I had to be healed before I could do the writing.

What would you say to a younger version of you if you could speak to her now?

Lois May: My original writing, the long version of my story, starts me writing as an eleven-year-old. It was the image of the gentleman with the man with blue eyes who changed the course of my life. I heard singing in the church, and I turned around because I had never heard music like that before. A man with bright blue eyes saw me turn, and he winked at me. That man was Mr B. He took an interest in all the Aboriginal families living in East Perth, and he also took an interest in my family too, even when we had moved back to Carnamah (which was the first time we had moved away and when we were the furthest from our families ever).

I had visited Mr and Mrs B's house, and I always knew I wanted to live in their house one day – and I did. Mr B knew I wanted better for myself. I will write about him more in my autobiography. Although I haven't changed so much from when I was a young girl, the stories of my past have become more important to me. I have even more of a fire in belly to write. My great-grandson has the same determined streak in him – he never gives up. And I think this story pulls out my mother's qualities – how hard it must have been for her – to give us the love and attention and care and good food when she was up against a brick wall the whole time.

The young Lois already had a plan for her future. I have always had that in me, and my instincts or sixth sense have always been very handy to protect me. Mum was always very vocal about self-protection. She brought us up to know that we could say no, and that we had the right to protect our own body. This knowledge is invaluable, and you try to give this to your own children. My dad was also protective, and he did protect us as girls in the family.

So, the advice I would give to young Lois would be to follow her dreams – even though this is exactly what I have done! But I have always been a person who knows when they are looking a gift horse in mouth, and to go for it.

How many worlds do you feel are contained within your own world – and how do you carry each of them?

Carol Foley: The lyrics from that song ‘White Man’s World’ really resonate with me. Basically, for me, there are always two worlds – one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal. When I was young, I learnt how to live in both. I learnt how to survive in the non-Aboriginal, wadjela way of doing things: e.g. working hard towards something, becoming recognised for your skills. Then when I got older, with education and life experience, I learned very clearly that the Aboriginal way of doing things is very different to a white Australian or Dutch way of doing things, and the cultures are quite different.

How do I carry each one of these worlds? It depends what mood I am in, and it depends what is going on around me as to how I carry myself in those worlds. When I perform, I can. When I choose not to, I don’t. Sometimes I choose to walk away and stand alone, even though that can be very isolating. Now, whether I want to be around my Aboriginal family or my non-Aboriginal family, I can choose which I want to do. But when I was growing up, that choice was not given to me.

What would you do differently if you had your time over?

Deb Green: If I had my time over, I would have tried to learn more from my grandmother before she passed away. My grandmother had a wealth of cultural knowledge that was imprisoned behind a wall of silence due to colonisation. It is a major reason I wrote about my mother in this memoir. Three generations suffered when they took my mother from my grandmother. The maternal bond was disturbed, which caused my mother and grandmother to have conflict. I therefore had no relationship with my grandmother, and I feel robbed of all the knowledge that could have been passed down.

What advice would you give to someone else if they wanted to write their own life story?

Barb Hostalek: Everyone has a good story to tell. Make it the version you want to tell and start as soon as you can. The first draft is the hardest and then there is the editing, reviewing, reflecting and re-writes, and reviewing, and editing and reflecting. Trust in the creative process and believe you can, you’ll get it done. I found great strength when I realised when you participate in artistic and creative pursuits, you are not alone ... and it’s in that strength that the world looks brighter and that together we can all make changes and elevate each other beyond the mundane, and the ugly to find the beauty, peace and most importantly—hope for tomorrow.

Valerie Swift: To firstly realise it will take some time, and that needs to be okay for you. You will find that you make so many changes throughout your writing as some particular memories will bring about other memories, that you wish to share so allowing time will help you with this.

When I first started, I also took time to understand what it could mean to me, my family and most importantly my kids, due to the fact that my story also holds parts of all their stories. Once I worked my way through that, it was then where to start and how to condense so much of my 72 years into a short story. It wasn’t easy and reflecting now, I have no doubt I pushed the timelines and my own strength on many occasions.

Lois May: My advice would be to go for it! Especially as I grow older, I think it has become more important to me to write. I have two books I would like to write. My second book especially that I plan to write will be for my children so they can understand who I am and where they come from. I would like to write things down so that I can get my stories out of my head and into print, and I am hoping it will help my children understand their mother a little bit more. I have been a good mother to them.

I think that my writing is also for other children in general. When we go into schools and share our stories,

BOOK CLUB NOTES

I know from talking with them that they will remember these stories as they grow older and that they will become advocates of Aboriginal people through hearing our stories, little allies who will grow up to continue the fight for us. Those children are our future.



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