

First published 2026 by  
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press  
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159  
fremantlepress.com.au

Copyright essays © individual contributors, 2026,  
introduction © Casey Mulder, 2026  
The moral rights of the authors have been asserted.

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Every reasonable effort has been made to seek permission for quotations contained herein. Please address any enquiries to the publisher.

Cover art © Kwobalitj (Carol/Coral Foley-Wilkes),  
*Connecting Branches*, 2025  
Design by Chloe Wilkinson.  
Printed by Everbest Printing Investment Limited, China.



A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760995010 (paperback)  
ISBN 9781760995027 (ebook)



Fremantle Press is supported by the Western Australian  
State Government through the Department of Cultural  
Industries, Tourism and Sport.

**COPYRIGHTAGENCY**  
CULTURAL FUND

This project is supported by the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.



*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers  
are respectfully advised that deceased people  
are referenced in this publication.*

First Nations women share their stories

# WORLDS *within* a WORLD

edited by  
Casey Mulder

with stories from  
Carol Foley, Deborah Green,  
Barb Hostalek, Lois May and Valerie Swift



FREMANTLE PRESS

her roots disturbed  
or branches lopped—  
all her pains are lessons  
tools, instructions  
carved into you  
and into me  
*and so on and so on ...*

the parent tree  
birthed a seed,  
and within the seed  
there we were—  
his thick hair  
her cutting edges  
his sun-flecked words  
their barking laughs  
world within a world within a world  
*and so on ...*

from 'old-growth forest' by Luisa Mitchell

# Contents

<b>Introduction – Casey Mulder</b>	1
<b>Who You?: Putting the jigsaw together – Carol Foley</b>	9
<b>Wirniny Baal – Valerie Swift</b>	49
<b>Pipeline Songline: A childhood memoir – Lois May</b>	91
<b>Fragile and Fierce – Deborah Green</b>	155
<b>Kaleidoscope of Learning – Barb Hostalek</b>	193
<b>Biographical Notes</b>	259

# Introduction

Casey Mulder

When I embarked on this project, I could never have predicted how transformative it would be. And here we are, three years after we started – standing as a group of Aboriginal women – releasing this book into the world. As you read these stories of courage, struggle, solidarity and strength, may you – as I did – gain a sense that there is wonder in your story too. These stories contain lessons, shared open-heartedly. As Luisa Mitchell so eloquently writes in her poem ‘old-growth forest’:

all her pains are lessons  
carved into you  
and into me  
*and so on and so on ...*

I felt honoured when I was first asked to work alongside poet and writing facilitator Nandi Chinna in inviting

Aboriginal women to share their stories for this anthology. She had met Lois May and Carol Foley during a project. The idea was that each contributor could use a longer-form essay to write about their life. Writing a book-length memoir can be a daunting prospect, and Aboriginal women's lives contain – as the title suggests – worlds within worlds. How could a short essay possibly provide enough room for meaningful exploration of one's story? The long-form essays in this collection address this dilemma. The women wrote freely and at length, unencumbered by the restrictive parameters of short essays, and free in the knowledge that 'the whole story' wasn't what this project asked of them. A relatively new editor, after a decade spent in high school teaching – the prospect of seeing an anthology from inception to publication was thrilling for me. I thought carefully about who to ask. Nandi was already working with Lois May and Coral Foley, having met them at poetry workshops on Country earlier that year where participants focused on the subject of water. Lois, who works tirelessly in the community, was already partway through writing a full-length memoir. Nandi offered her support as Lois continued with this endeavour. And Carol was working in schools, teaching Noongar language and creating art, always immersed in stories. As Carol shared some of her story, Nandi encouraged her to start writing it out too. And the concept of this anthology was born.

Through the project Nandi, Lois, Carol and then Barb Hostalek became close friends, as they shared the often-traumatic stories of welfare files, achievements, adventures, heartache, strength, and resilience. Nandi's observations about this process could be applied to each of the book's contributors:

I was, and still am, in awe of their creativity, and their courage to tell their stories, stories which are important to all of us in understanding who we are as Western Australians. There is a huge generosity in the sharing of these stories. By telling their stories the women are welcoming us into their families and their experiences. And that is a huge privilege.

At the project's conclusion, Nandi Chinna expressed her thanks and gratitude to all of the women who share their stories here:

It's been a profound and deeply moving experience for me as a wadjella to have had the honour of working with these extraordinary women.

With some of the writing underway, I was invited to help curate this collection, and Fremantle Press suggested we look for more Aboriginal women – perhaps some who'd grown up outside of Whadjuk and Ballardong Boodja, women of different experiences and ages. I started by calling two women I love and respect – Charmaine Papertalk Green

and Roni Forrest. I wanted them to feel very free to say yes to the opportunity themselves, but they both pointed me towards other women in their families whose stories they felt needed their time in the sun. So I called Valerie Swift and Deb Green – having never met either of them before – and after a yarn or two on the phone, they both agreed. Deb had recently attended a writing residency in NSW with Charmaine, and Charmaine had been encouraging her to write. Deb is a true creative and has incredible style, as does Valerie, who has worked in Health for many, many years impacting innumerable lives. Val’s big sister Carol Pettersen had shared her story in her memoir *Following the Spirit of the Yirdah Bird: Carol’s Story* (Danjoo Koorliny Boorloo, Centre for Social Impact, 2023) and Val responded to her sister’s prompting that it was her time now.

Nandi also suggested Barb Hostalek – a talented and comedically brilliant playwright I’d met through the First Nations Australia Writers Network. Barb, Charmaine and I had spent three days together cruising around in a little Suzuki Swift at the FNAWN Summit in Mparntwe in the Northern Territory and we became fast friends. I wholeheartedly agreed with Nandi, and we had our writers.

Life can feel frenetic at times, and I regularly chastise myself for succumbing to the pressures of this unsustainable pace. This collection of stories was born out of being present with one another in a way that fostered deep friendships

forged through vulnerability and care. Nandi and I were not simply editors of these women’s memoirs: we became their friends. Where I was initially asked to use my professional expertise to help craft these stories, I quickly realised that the main thing I needed to do was to listen and remain present. As initial deadlines passed, I realised I wasn’t in control of this project in the way I had thought I ‘should’ be. Instead, I learned to reframe this lack of control as a process of ‘entering in’ – I was able to see the wealth of what this experience had become. And I learned to sit with these women in their stories, as each storyteller in turn made room for Nandi and I to share our own.

In sharing their stories, the authors wrote using languages and dialects that they grew up speaking or that they’ve been grateful to have shared with them on the Country where they live. This was one understanding we shared from the beginning: Aboriginal languages are oral languages first, and since colonisation – as these languages have been written down – there are variances in spelling. We are grateful for the support of Merinda Hansen with her language guidance. We have not translated these words in-text, for the story is held in these languages first. You can find a glossary at the end of each piece. We hope this encourages you to embrace the wonder of First Nations languages.

Not only do the stories within this anthology speak of the journeys of these women, they speak of storytelling

and yarning as a practice. As I embraced a posture of learning, prioritising connection, the women embraced the experiences of telling stories to Nandi and me. There were mornings over a cuppa or two where other café patrons would glance our way, bemused by two women laughing uncontrollably. One such cuppa was the long-awaited first meeting between one of the writers and I, who up to that point had only communicated online as she lives a long way from the city. As Nandi and I spent time with each of the women, there was room to speak of our frustrations and room to travel to significant places on Country. On one particular occasion, one of the women shared a story of deep pain with me and, as I sat by her side weeping, she wrapped her arms around me. She took a piece of paper, drawing an image to explain how she was able to move through the pain of what she'd shared. She spoke of hope, gesturing to the other side of the pain in her drawing. I drove home that day crying tears of both sorrow and gratitude. On another occasion, one of the women shared about the great love of her life – who had come to her unexpectedly and despite her initial resistance. I felt seen in my own newfound love – recent and healing and beautiful. And I told her so. And thanked her for all the ways her story was speaking to my own.

That's what this book is. A physical manifestation of the powerful relationships between women from different generations who chose to share time and space. The seed

of these stories, each birthed from their own parent trees, speaks to joy as much as pain, powerful resistance and resilience, as well as the love of family. These stories from five different lives speak to the unending strength, wisdom and love of Aboriginal women, who choose again and again and again to remain generous and open-hearted and kind as we show up for our families, for mob and for our communities.

This is your invitation to enter in. You are welcome here.