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Tribute to Ruby Langford Ginibi

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At Ruby's funeral in Sydney on October 5, 2011 something became very clear to me. As people lined up beside the open coffin to pay tribute and tell their stories I realised how so many felt *they* were someone special in Ruby's life, that *they* mattered to *her*.

The ecumenical service – she had wanted it to be independent of any church but no suitable premises could be found – was a time of tears and laughter. Lots of laughter. Stories about the woman, songs, risqué jokes even. Some of us said that under different circumstances Ruby would have enjoyed every minute of the irreverence and humour.

I half expected her to open her eyes, sit up, grin, and say, "That fooled you all, eh!"

Black and white Australia lost one of its most outstanding voices with Ruby's death. She was a woman of the Bundjalung people in northern New South Wales. She was born in 1934 on Box Ridge Mission, close to the northern NSW town of Coraki. The mission was one of hundreds such institutions throughout Australia, virtual prison camps for Aborigines. Her description of those hard, early days became the beginning of her first work, *Don't Take Your Love to Town.* Ruby was a writer, talker, educator, mother, grandmother, great grandmother, friend and inspiration to thousands in Australia and throughout the world. She was a bridge between two cultures, and a fighter. Above all a fighter.

My introduction to the writings of Ruby came when I picked up a copy of *Don't Take Your Love to Town.* I was inspired by this story of an Indigenous woman who lived a life of struggle unimaginable to the vast majority of white people. The story was terrible in so many ways. But what spoke to me loudest and clearest was the voice of an unsinkable spirit. No matter how many times Ruby Langford Ginibi was pushed under, she kicked her way back to the surface. I felt she was a powerful example for all of us. After reading *Don't Take Your Love to Town* in 1988 I did something I had never done before, I wrote to an author, care of a publisher. I told Ruby what my reactions were to her story – and thought that would be the

end of it. A few months later the phone rang and I picked it up. A voice said, "G'day, Ruby Langford Ginibi here."

We were mates from then until her death, almost a quarter of a century later. Every once in a while one would ring the other and we'd yarn about dastardly publishers, even worse politicians, the Indigenous fight for equity, and how life was treating us.

We'd meet up sometimes when she was speaking somewhere; a writers' festival; a university. She was never far away. I'd read about her in the papers. Hear her on the radio, see her on TV. Always the same Ruby, bumping her gums.

People who have read her books know that she was abandoned by her mother as a child. She survived brutal back-breaking physical work in the bush; feckless male partners; the death of some of her children; the incarceration of a son; and all the other "recurring" indignities of being Indigenous and growing up in the thirties and beyond.

The stories she told over the last three decades were of herself and her family; her extended family; of clan and friends; they are therefore both personal and universal to Indigenous people. Her prose is direct and unadorned, written by someone who set out to tell the truth, not set out to impress or court success. She wanted her books read of course, but that's not the same thing, and more money would always have been welcome.

Although Ruby was born in 1934 it was not until 1984 that she started to write *Don't Take Your Love to Town.* In the acknowledgement she describes it as, "a true life story of an Aboriginal woman's struggle to raise a family of nine children in a society divided between black and white culture in Australia" (n.p.). This first work was to the forefront of literature that told of life as it was from an Indigenous viewpoint. Her stories are of pain and hardship, prejudice and abuse, but laughter is never far from the pain. Whenever I think of Ruby I see her beaming face and hear her roaring with laughter.

Since that first autobiographical book I have read all her works and personally recommended them to anyone seeking an insight into what it means to be an Indigenous Australian. When friends, either in Australia or overseas, ask me what would be a good start in understanding the history of this country I refer them first to Ruby. When I want a present to send overseas I send one of Ruby's books.

Ruby's contribution to understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia is eloquently expressed in her books, her poetry and her humour. Through telling the stories of her life she was one of the first Indigenous authors in Australia to bring the history of her people – until recent years hidden and denied by the dominant society – to white Australians.

Don't Take Your Love to Town won the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission award for literature in 1988. Other books and awards followed.

But even in the world of literary awards the slights did not end. Ruby was nominated for the annual Red Ochre Awards, which pay tribute to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artist who has made an outstanding contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. Ruby was outraged to be asked to provide documentary proof of her Aboriginality.

This bureaucratic mindset which would accept only a piece of paper as evidence of belonging to the oldest continuous living culture in existence was highly insulting and racist to Ruby. It was virtually the equivalent of denying Indigenous ownership of the land at the time of British invasion because there were no title deeds to prove it. Ruby is clearly physically Indigenous. Her stories trace back her family and connections to the land and to her people over many generations.

Her verbal response to the person who made the request was not flattering. Colourful, certainly. But probably best left unrepeated. She never provided "proof" but following that request, I nominated her again, year after year, and her many admirers and scholars wrote letters in support of the application. Always without success.

Ruby's life was triumph over tragedy. Embodied in her was all the racist oppression of Indigenous Australians, from dispossession, to stolen children – and its opposite, the determination that no matter what the odds, they will fight, reclaim and advance their place in their country.

Ruby was fifteen-years-old when she moved to Sydney and trained as a machinist. She had her first child at seventeen, had eight more, and raised them mainly on her own, while often doing gut-busting work like scrub clearing and fencing in the bush. In *Haunted by the Past*, "a story about jail, juvenile incarceration, institutionalisation, and Aboriginal deaths in custody," she wrote, "the men came and went; the babies came and stayed" (7).

Three of her children, Pearl, William and David died in tragic circumstances and a fourth, Lindsay (Nobby) Johnson, has undergone years of incarceration in what Ruby called Her Majesty's gaols, yet another of the injustices heaped upon Indigenous people. Although Indigenous Australians make up less than three per cent of the population, they make up nearly thirty per cent of those in custody. The vast majority are gaoled for minor offences. From 1991 to 2010 some 300 Indigenous people died in custody. Many of the deaths were suicide. Some died under suspicious circumstances or at the hands of police or prison officers. Others have been shot on the streets or died while being pursued by police.

As I write this, in April 2012, Sydney police a few days ago shot, then bashed, the fourteen-year-old driver of an allegedly stolen car after it mounted a footpath and hit a pedestrian before coming to a halt. An eighteen-year-old front seat passenger was also shot. Four other passengers were in the car, aged from thirteen to twenty-four. All the occupants were Indigenous. The injured youths survived, but with what permanent physical and mental injuries no one yet knows.

In November 2004, another Indigenous Australian, Cameron Doomadgee, did *not* survive a police assault. Doomadgee, from Palm Island, a notorious former church-run mission in tropical Queensland, was arrested by Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley for being drunk and swearing. Less than an hour later Doomadgee was dead of horrendous injuries. He had four broken ribs and a liver that had been "almost cleaved in two."

The injuries were likened to those that could be sustained in a high speed car crash. Hurley said Doomadgee had fallen while he was placing him in a cell. An all-white jury found Hurley not guilty of unlawful killing or assault. During judicial proceedings the Queensland Police Union organised an unprecedented and chilling mass march of officers on the Queensland state parliament in support of Hurley. Sometime later Doomadgee's sixteen-year-old son Eric, hung himself from a tree. Another young man who had been in the police lock-up at the time Doomadgee was killed also committed suicide.

Time has been much kinder to Senior Sergeant Hurley than to the Doomadgee family. Hurley was awarded $100,000 for property damaged during the three days of rioting that followed Doomadgee's death and continues to work as a police officer on the Gold Coast.

A number of years ago Ruby and Nobby, an artist (the subject of Ruby's book, *Haunted by the Past),* engaged in a unique creative collaborative exhibition, *Mother and Son, the Dreaming Continues.* The filial bond added an even greater depth to what they had to say through their paintings, prose, and photographs. The Dreaming does continue, but so does the nightmare.

Those close to Ruby hoped that in her late years she would acquire some of the peace that had eluded her throughout life. This wasn't to be. Life continued to be a struggle. Nobby was once more committed to gaol in the most terrible of circumstances. Ruby had to move from her little public housing home in the outer suburbs of Sydney, where Nobby had been her carer, to a nursing home in the city. Perhaps there, for a short time, she had some kind of peace. There was constant professional care, and something Ruby loved so much, an audience.

There were times when she did despair. Occasionally it came through in her conversation. But not for long. Despair and self-obsession were quickly banished to the outer kingdom to live alongside silence and passivity.

Despite the efforts of many, black and white, the injustices that Ruby railed against have not been vanquished. Indigenous Australians still have a life expectancy seventeen years or more below that of white Australians. They still die in custody and on the streets at the hands of police. The racism that Ruby fought against and wrote so passionately about is thus not resolved for Indigenous Australians.

I learned from her that there is no such thing as giving up and that the fight for equity is a

fight that is waged in literature as much as in the wider world of politics. Ruby entranced me with her powers as a storyteller and inspired me to be involved in the struggle.

I read all of Ruby's books and many of the growing number that came from emerging Indigenous authors. I engaged in Indigenous issues and gave my support wherever I was able. In the early nineties I was a founding member of Friends of Tranby Aboriginal College in Sydney and have edited its newsletter for many years.

The co-operative College was established over fifty years ago by trade unions, progressive Christians and others. It has been a pioneer in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult education, training and social action for over fifty years. High on its list of priorities has been the teaching of literacy to Indigenous people who were failed by the education system, perhaps among them are a new generation of story tellers; a new generation of fighters for the Indigenous cause.

In 2006 a festival of literature and art was held at the College. Among the high number of Indigenous writers, poets and artists who took part was, of course, Ruby.

Ruby was buried, ironically, in the sandy soil of Botany Bay, beneath the shadow of container wharves, where the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1770 marked the beginning of British invasion and colonisation – but not – as most settlers hoped, the end of Indigenous Australia.

Ruby is gone but her stories and her indestructible spirit are still with us. Her hectoring, her every present laugh, her "shining moon" face will be missed by many. But many will continue where she left off.

Ends

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