

Meeting Ruby

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Abstract: This is a personal memoir of my meeting and subsequent correspondence with Ruby Langford Ginibi

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I first got to know Ruby Langford Ginibi through her work. Prof. John Barnes, now Emeritus Professor, from La Trobe University suggested I read her work and then he came to introduce Ruby's work onto the Postcolonial syllabus at Barcelona University. I attended those classes and was struck not only by my own empathy with Ruby's work but also how the students reacted so strongly to it. They were both fascinated and taken aback at the stories that emerged from her work. For the majority, it was their first contact with an Indigenous writer. They had no previous knowledge other than the socio-historical context which I had done with them before John arrived. While they were shocked enough by this, they were even further shaken when I explained that none of the Indigenous history of Australia had been taught to me at school, nor that of Canada and New Zealand for that matter. All our wall maps were devoted to Commonwealth Countries picked out in proud pink patches, all once part of the "Great" British Empire. From this came a lengthy class discussion on both the unreliability of history and cartography and on how the metropolis of Empire, in this case Britain, can actually believe that all it had done was "for the good of its colonial subjects". A further discussion took us into how the British Empire left such an indelible print on settler societies like Australia and how the Indigenous Peoples of Australia were deemed the dying race and the consequent consistent undermining of their culture, identity, and lives as a result of colonial policies, and the implementation of physical and cultural eugenics with the Stolen Generations. A final discussion took us into a comparative mode by looking at European empires and, most importantly, the Spanish Empire which peaked with Carlos V's reign. It was at this point that the students were stunned by their own ignorance regarding the Spanish Empire. I floated the question: had anybody in the class read "*A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*" by the Dominican friar, Bartolomé de las Casas, the first Bishop of Chiapas and the First appointed Protector of the Indians? The predictable answer was no but, even more importantly they immediately grabbed the word "Protector" in the light of the socio-historical background we had done in class regarding the Indigenous Peoples of Australia.

If the socio-historical context of the Indigenous Peoples of Australia had rocked my students, Ruby's work spoke to them in a direct and forthright voice which, as they put it, they could "actually hear". This aspect of the effect of Ruby's work I found fascinating because, for the first time, the class was confronted by Indigenous English, which spoke to them directly, with no punches held back and yet which, as they said, revealed a woman of great courage and spirit, of great generosity and, something that often baffled them, a woman who was able to laugh at almost anything. Many queried how she could write with such brutal honesty and yet with no sign of bitterness. They found the answer in Ruby's own words throughout her work and in 1999, in particular, in *Haunted by the Past* which came to be a lasting favourite for generations of students.

We were fortunate enough to be able to host John Barnes at Barcelona University on several occasions to teach at various levels. Over these periods he established a publication called *Australian Conversations*. These publications gave the chance to exchange students going to La Trobe to establish contact with writers and to interview them and see the interviews published. Unfortunately, although funding came from Robert Archer in the La Trobe Spanish Department, only two issues came out. One of them was an interview by an undergraduate student, Blanca Fullana, with Ruby.¹

At the time I know that Ruby was thrilled that this young undergraduate was coming across the world with a specific agenda to interview her. I remember Blanca as excited at going out to La Trobe on exchange, but in awe of the fact that she was to meet and talk to Ruby. The result was, firstly, a great publication and secondly, what Blanca would later call "one of the most extraordinary moments of her life". I would dearly have loved to be the fly on the wall at that interview as I could well imagine what enthusiasm would flow between the two of them and what an absolutely unique experience it would have been for a young Spanish English Philology student.

I myself was not to meet Ruby until 1997. John Barnes had done the groundwork for our meeting which was to involve the making of a documentary on her. My friend and colleague, Jeff Doyle, from ADFA at the University of New South Wales, was to accompany both myself and the camera operator. Jeff had long been touched by Ruby's work, but was also particularly interested in the artwork of her son, Nobby. We set out to drive from Canberra to Sydney stopping overnight along the way. In the course of that night I received a call to tell me that my mother, then seriously ill, was not expected to live beyond a week, if that. The airline company I was flying with could not get me a compassionate return ticket within the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours. After much discussion with Jeff, I decided to continue with the trip as I was trapped anyway. The evening we arrived in Sydney, I received another call to say that my mother had died. As I still had at least another twenty-four hours before takeoff for London, or more, I again decided to go ahead. John and Jeff had done so much to make this possible and I also knew that Ruby was excited at the fact that a documentary was to be made of her and taken back for our students to watch in Spain.²

The next morning was an early start with a debate about what to buy for Ruby as a gift. At that time she was staying at the Aboriginal residence "Allawah", in order to give her children a rest from caring for her. That kind of move was typical of Ruby's care for her large extended family. Apart from her own immediate family of nine children, she had

innumerable adopted members and her house was always open to those in need. Ruby had been a battler all her life, indeed from the age of sixteen going on seventeen when she had her first child. At the age of sixteen she started the first of four relationships and in order to keep her growing family together, a priority in her life, she worked where and at what she could: rural itinerant work, fencing, as a machinist and a number of other jobs that would keep the family together. She had also become the victim of alcoholism which she finally kicked in 1984 when she began writing her first book: *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, published in 1988.³ The serendipitous irony of the coincidence of the publication with the bicentennial celebrations of the invasion/landing of the First Fleet of Convicts in 1788 was not lost on any of her readers.

Ruby makes no excuses for her own life and her addiction, but in *Don't Take Your Love to Town* she traces the story of her day to day battles with life, a hostile administration, racial discrimination, injustice and her growing awareness of the role she could play as a writer and activist becoming a voice for those who had been and still were silenced.

By 1997, the time had now come to give her children a respite from caring for her as by then Ruby was beginning to be increasingly less mobile and more delicate in health, but she was still going strong as a writer and public speaker. Being in the residence meant we ruled out flowers as a gift given she might have many. Perfume was out because it is such a personal taste. John Barnes had told me she loved chocolate so chocolate it was to be. We found a wonderful cake and chocolate shop and invested in a large box of "sinful" delights and then went on and bought a large assortment of baklavas. Now prepared, we set off to meet Ruby.

When I walked in to the room where Ruby was sitting I was aware of large brown eyes observing us all carefully with a half smile. We introduced ourselves and Ruby looked straight at me and said:

"Well you're not Australian, you're obviously not Spanish where are you from?"

"England", I replied.

There was a fraction of a moment's silence and she said "Oh, you're one of *them*, sit down and I will 'edumacate' you" she bubbled with laughter, but she meant it!

While the camera was being set up and cables plugged in I gave her the presents we had bought.

"Ooh" she said. "Chocolates. You know, I have three favourite things chocolates, perfume and men" She absolutely rumbled with laughter. I can't remember the order she put them in and it hardly matters. That was Ruby. She then wanted to know more about me, not in the probing British way as a means of classifying me in a neat "class" pigeon hole, but in order to know who I was and where I was coming from. When she learnt my parents were dead, that I had one brother, did not know my cousins and had never met my grandparents she leant across and said firmly: "You will call me Auntie then, I will be a proper Auntie to you." That was a moment I will never forget. To be given that privilege was a gift of affection and caring from a woman whose compassion took on the emotional and spiritual welfare of others. She was true to her word.

So, “Edumacate me” she did. For almost two hours she talked to me about the history of her people, about deaths in custody about Nobby, her son. Her profound belief in Human Rights and how her people had been savaged without regard to Human Rights or any other national or international law drove her powerful discourse. I experienced the power of her convictions, the truth of her work as a historian first hand and was, like my students, deeply moved by the fact that her work revealed no underlying long standing anger towards those who, from 1788 onwards, had decimated Indigenous peoples. Yes, she was angry at times, extremely angry, but not consumed by bitterness. Her rationale was to get out there and fight with words, with telling the stories of what had happened, with writing the alternative history to the mainstream version most people had access to. Anger alone was “... a very negative attitude (...) And anger *alone* doesn't get you anywhere” (Langford Ginibi 1999, 89).⁴ “I'm good at rubbing me gums together when I get going” she said with a chuckle.⁵ She was more than good, she was a superb activist both verbally and with her pen.

I had taken a list of questions that I wanted to ask Ruby, but they went west almost at once. I would ask one question and Ruby, in a concise way, would often go beyond the immediate question and answer four in one. I was worried my list would not be enough, but one of Ruby's great skills was to hold her audience and move backward and forward in time as she dealt with the history of her people, her views of what should happen in terms of reconciliation and restitution. Ruby was adamant that, in spite of many critics reading her work as auto/biographical, she was in fact writing history, history from the long silenced other side. As she pointed out there are two sides to every story and her peoples' history had never been properly told. Time and again she reiterated this analysis of her work and could become quite flinty if an interviewer tried to shift her work in the other direction.

Ruby was equally as adamant about the way non-Indigenous editors or writers of oral histories required the text to be “translated”, linguistically sanitised, in order for them to be published. As she pointed out, neither she nor her people spoke in that way and any interference with the manuscript on a linguistic level was yet another example of outside manipulation. Ruby herself had had an experience of this type and apart from her dismay and anger she felt it was yet again an infringement of Indigenous Rights. It was a clear example of linguistic colonisation and Ruby was not the only Indigenous author to have her work “doctored” in this way. She was also a great supporter of those who merited her respect. Thus when the discussion raged as to whether or not Mudrooroo Narogin was indeed Aboriginal she firmly declared in a phone conversation that “Muddy”, as she called him, would always be her “Muddy.”

Once the official filming was over, we all sat together over a cup of tea. During this informal moment Ruby suddenly put her hand on my knee and said: “I don't know what it is, but you are deeply distressed”. I felt that she had intuited my mother's death. I also knew, as Jeff told me afterwards, there was not a crack in my outward demeanour that in any way revealed there was something wrong. To say I was taken aback is putting it mildly. I know some people would say that this is typical of Indigenous people, that they have a link into the spiritual world that allows them to detect things others do not. I don't believe that was the case with Ruby. While not denying the spiritual powers

Indigenous People have proven to have over centuries, I have always felt it was much more a case of that sixth sense that so many people worldwide have. I suppose I am wary of the consistent over romanticisation that has gone on with regard to Indigenous People and their extra-sensorial powers from an often white paternalistic perspective. Whatever it was, and I will never know, Ruby had sensed something and to the day she died I never told her what exactly had happened to me. It was neither appropriate then, as Ruby was my focus, and with the passing of time I let the subject go.

Although the official filming was over, Ruby asked if we would like to see some of her art work and to look at some of Nobby's work which she had on display and she allowed the camera to roll again. Jeff was the expert on art and he asked the questions but there was no doubt about it, Nobby's work was as powerful as Ruby's own. Then Ruby pulled out some of her own work from a drawer, illustrations for a project she was working on but which, as far as I know, was something that remained unpublished. She also read snippets of prose and poetry to us as we sat beside her and listened as she told the history of what she had read. Soon the time came to go and I remember Ruby's hug to this day. I had put my hand out as on arrival "that's no way to say goodbye" she said "and anyway you'll be back" and gave me one of those warm enveloping hugs that are so precious in memory.

I never saw Ruby again. We did exchange letters and occasional phone calls always warm and affectionate and she would ask what were my students doing and were they learning the true history and drinking it in. Then, two things happened. During one conversation Ruby had asked me if I got the *Koori Mail* and I told her that at that time they were not taking non-national subscriptions. Quite suddenly I received two mail packets each with a consecutive six months worth of the *Koori Mail*. Now Ruby did not have a huge amount of money to be sending packages overseas, but she was concerned that our students had access to the Koori voice and news. I had told her how I was always concerned that not only was I an outsider and white teaching Indigenous culture and literature to students, but that material was not at all easy to get hold of. Typically that was her way of helping to cover gaps and all her books, were sent to me with a dedication to both myself "and the students at Barcelona University". Regarding my own hesitation about my teaching in the field she enabled my confidence by telling me that I could only do my best and as long as I had bonafide people who could guide me then I would be fine. Fortunately, I could count on herself and John Barnes, while over the years we had Indigenous writers and artists visit us and give lectures to our students.

My learning curve has never really stopped since first reading Ruby's work. One of her questions to me at the time of the interview was precisely on the format my teaching took. I explained that I used the History of the Indigenous peoples of Australia and their culture and then moved forwards to invite reflection in my students on Spanish and other colonial histories of similar ilk. "Yes, that's fine" she said. "But always remember that a history, steeped in atrocity as it may be, which is five hundred years old can not be compared in the light of reason, humanity and Human Rights to one which is only two hundred odd years old. That must be made clear." Hence the *Koori Mail*.

The next thing that happened was a telephone call, one of two I had from Ruby, in the small hours of the morning. Never at my best in the morning, I took a while to actually

realise who was on the phone. "Look Susan, it's me Ruby" she laughed. She was ringing to know about a small sum of pesetas which had been paid into her bank account and was I responsible for the payment. "I wish", I thought to myself. The only reason I could think of was that it had come through some kind of royalty payment from sales of her work in Spain as by that time a number of universities were teaching her work. I don't know that we ever got to the bottom of it, but Ruby laughingly ended the conversation with "Well always good to have dear."

The world today is a wiser place because of Ruby and her work. Her voice has reached out across the world enabling the betterment of our understanding of Australian Indigenous history and culture and also of humanity. Above everything else she was, Ruby was a uniquely "human" person. She was not blind to her own faults nor to those of others, but her greatest gift to people like myself who knew her was her empowering presence and mind. To generations of students in a classroom in Barcelona she became a figure they could relate to, respect and whose exuberant voice and humour captivated them. What I personally will most miss as a result of Ruby's death is all the work she wanted to write, all the poetry that will remain unwritten, the critical voice that has been silenced, the seductive clear-headed thinking that went into every word she wrote. "Ginibi" means Black Swan, Ruby's Bundjalung name was given to Ruby by her aunt Eileen Morgan at Box Ridge Mission in 1990. "Ginibi" has travelled the world in ways Ruby perhaps never imagined possible. "Ginibi" will continue to fly and inspire generations of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous People with her relentless truth, courage, humour, her skills as a survivor and her amazing capacity for compassion.

Vale Ruby Langford Ginibi.

NOTES

¹ The following year two other students chose to interview Dorothy Hewett.

² There was never any question that the documentary would be commercialised in any way and I had made it clear to John and Ruby that it would only be used in our classrooms.

³ *Don't Take Your Love to Town* won the the Australian Human Rights Award for Literature in 1988.

⁴ My italics.

⁵ I have only reproduced Ruby Langford Ginibi's English on two occasions "Edumacate" and "Rubbing Bumping me gums together". I would not dream of attempting to do so. Ruby's voice, like all voices was a personal one, as was her English and should be respected as such. These two expressions were however, ones she used time and again to me and many others and give a flavour of her voice to my own text.

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