



The Storyteller

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Anita Heiss is one of Australia's most prolific Aboriginal authors. She's penned a dozen books and has another three on the way. But she still has unfinished business when it comes to Australian literature.

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The unlikely story of how Anita Heiss' parents fell in love is a topic of great intrigue whenever the writer travels to Austria.

"Mum is from an Aboriginal mission in Cowra," says Heiss. "She was 29 when she got the right to vote. My father came from a little village in Austria with hardly any education. He couldn't even speak English when he met my mum."

Her parents, Joe and Elsie, had "absolutely nothing" in common except for a shared work ethic, family values and the fact that they were both considered outsiders. Yet, after a first date watching a Greek movie which neither could understand, then persistent courting efforts by Joe, love conquered.

"This is why I'm still single at 47," Heiss laughs. "Because I want that kind of love story!"

The art of storytelling runs thick in Heiss' veins. She has written a dozen books, from novels to memoirs and historical fiction, and has another three due for publishing within the next 12 months. The first will be a novel for adolescents about an Aboriginal boy growing up in the small New South Wales town of Cowra.

Harry's Secret explores challenges that any Australian kid will be familiar with – he's scared of sharing his artistic talents because he doesn't want to be judged by other students. The reason for writing the story, says Heiss, was simple.

"It's not rocket science," she says. "We need books to inspire young boys to read, particularly young Koori (Aboriginal) lads."

"But these books aren't just to appeal to Aboriginal boys. What I'm trying to do is make it so it's not a separatist kind of story. It involves a common story that young kids all around the country can relate to. They all have the same fears."

Establishing connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has been a driving force throughout Heiss' career. She is never one to skirt around uncomfortable issues. Instead, she leaps in with fiery, considered precision, shedding light on the positive stories unfolding in Australia's Indigenous communities.

AM I BLACK ENOUGH FOR YOU?

In her intimate memoir *Am I Black Enough For You?*, Heiss tackles issues of skin colour, identity and what it means to be an Aboriginal Australian in the 21st century.

"I felt compelled to provide a resource to simplify what is for many people a very complex issue," says Heiss.

"Thirty-two per cent of our Indigenous people live in urban areas. We are managers, writers, youth workers, teachers, and we contribute to society every day. Through all of my writing, I'm trying to find what connects us as an Australian community, rather than what disconnects us."

It is an honest, fierce read that is laced with Heiss' wit and dry humour. She was awarded the 2012 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing and was a finalist in the Human Rights Awards Media for non-fiction writing for her efforts.

DREAM TIME

Heiss is grateful for Joe and Elsie's determination to make education a priority for their children. She was the first person from her family to go to university and she's now an Adjunct Professor at the University of Technology Sydney's Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning. One of her proudest moments was when she became the first Aboriginal person to graduate from the University of Western Sydney with a PhD.

Heiss is an ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation and she'll be again running in this year's Sunshine Coast half marathon in Queensland to raise money for the cause. It will be her fifth half marathon.

"Literacy is essential to Aboriginal people's self-determination," says Heiss.

"If we cannot read, we cannot make the decisions that inevitably impact on our lives. Self-determination requires each of us to have the literacy to have the power to make our own decisions and control our own futures. Only when we are self-determined as individuals will we be self-determined as a nation of peoples."

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LITERACY AND EDUCATION

Through her work as an Indigenous literacy ambassador, Heiss takes this message of empowerment to schools around Australia, where she trains educators and encourages students to dream big.

Passionate about helping teachers introduce more Indigenous stories into classrooms, she feels encouraged by a similar focus in the current restructure of Australia's national school curriculum.

"I go into classrooms now and I say to them that the only chore they really have is to decide what they want to do, because these students are surrounded by amazing staff and support," says Heiss.

Heiss dreams of a future where Indigenous children have the opportunities that the majority of Australian kids have – access to equal education, good schools and good teachers – and the capacity to follow their wildest dreams.

"I work with Koori children in Sydney who want to be engineers, astronauts, business owners, football players... all this at the age of 12!" says Heiss.

"They've all thought about what they want to do. That's why things like books and access to the internet is so important. It gives kids the capacity to dream beyond what happens within a community."

Heiss draws on her own experience when she talks about dreaming big. Some of her most successful novels including *Paris Dreaming* and *Manhattan Dreaming* (which have both won Deadly Awards for their contribution to literature) are set in cities Heiss herself loves visiting for speaking events and writers' festivals.

"There is so much interest around the world in Aboriginal Australia," says Heiss.

"I was in Vienna recently to do some events for the Australian embassy and I gave a lecture on Aboriginal children's literature at the University of Vienna. I also gave a talk at the ESSL museum in Austria, which is home to one of Europe's largest private collections of Indigenous artwork. It was extraordinary!"

Heiss' deep-seated passion and workaholic tendencies drive her to write more, travel more and tell anyone who will listen about the importance of Aboriginal literacy.

"Rather than 'Indigenous writing' being seen as a niche area, I'd like to see it become more integrated... that the contribution we make is recognised as 'Australian literature'."

| [Anita Heiss website](#)