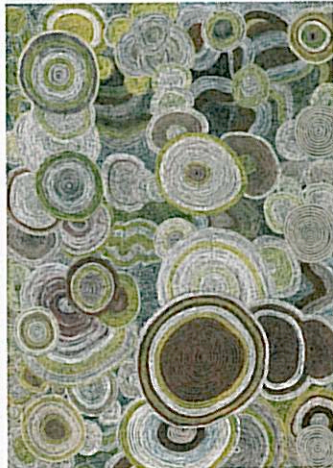


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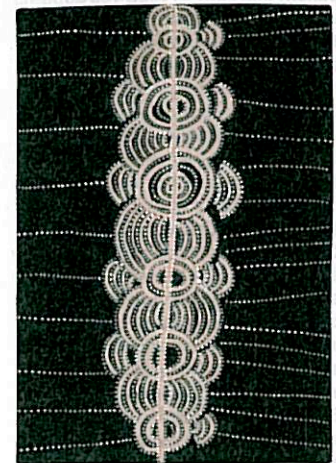
Is Aussie lit really any cop?



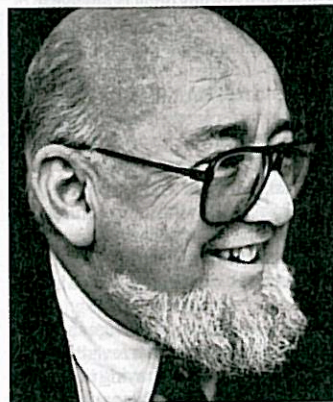
LORRIE GILMAN



TINGARI CEREPONY AT LUNGKUMUR/GAWURJINGA, JUNE 1974 SHIRRY LUNGKUMURTA



YAM TRAVELING IN THE SANDHILLS (VERSION 2), LATE 1971 MICK MAMARRI TAPALTJARRI



CHILDREN'S WATER DREAMINGS (VERSION 2) SHIRRY LUNGKUMURTA LUNGKUMURTA



CHILDREN'S WATER DREAMINGS (VERSION 2) SHIRRY LUNGKUMURTA LUNGKUMURTA

Join the dots Aboriginal artists (like these from Papunya territory) and writers still struggle for the renown of white Aussies like Kate Grenville and Thomas Keneally

There may still be dodgy headgear lurking in the Outback but there's nothing wrong with Aussie brains.

Nina Caplan celebrates the rich, multicoloured culture of a historically troubled nation

There aren't many opportunities for unselfconscious racism available to the chattering classes these days, but Australia offers one: maintaining that the cultural apogee of an entire continent involves charcoal, shellfish and a rousing chorus of 'Waltzing Matilda' washed down with an inland sea of beer is still perfectly acceptable in this hemisphere. Perhaps it's poetic justice: white Australia's record on race is execrable, after all. As one of the Aboriginal writer Herb Wharton's characters puts it, 'for over 200 years they've come here, taken our land, killed our people and disrupted our

laws.' Contempt for Australian culture isn't comparable to the murder and mayhem that preceded and helped engender it, but it is the latest link in a chain of injustices that goes all the way back to the convicts transported for life, often for trivial crimes, and the Aboriginal people the jail colonies displaced and disenfranchised. In his foreword to the new anthology 'The Literature of Australia', Thomas Keneally, author most famously of 'Schindler's Ark', succinctly describes them as 'two cultures plagued by mutual incomprehension but one possessing the arms to express their chagrin more fatally'.

This anthology is a pretty good riposte to the cultural snobs. It is very different from any English equivalent, with its convicts' poems (check the cheeky 'A Convict's Tour of Hell', by Frank the Poet), its heartbreaking request from the ailing eighteenth-century Aboriginal Bennelong for stockings, handkerchiefs and most importantly, remembrance; its

introduction of a baby girl to her grandfather via a letter that would take months to reach its destination. It's literature, but not as we know it, a signal that Australia isn't just an outpost of the West but a vast and complicated place with its own needs, talents – and dishonours. There are Aussie writers now who are international household

It sends a signal that Australia isn't just an outpost of the West

names: Keneally, Judith Wright, Peter Carey, Clive James, Kate Grenville, although these are all white. There is terrific Aboriginal writing in English these days, but the original Australians are better known for art like the kind shown here (1970s Aboriginal paintings from new book 'Icons of the Desert'), although if the styles are becoming

familiar over here, the individual artists aren't – yet. But this anthology contains a wealth of writing black and white, fictional and factual, from First Fleet-er Watkin Tench to Iraqi immigrant Yahia Al-Samawy and from Christina Stead to Germaine Greer. There are indigenous legends transcribed by David Unaipon, in 1929 the first Aboriginal writer to author a work (the next would be Kath Walker a full 35 years later; she's also here); heroes, scoundrels, victims, even a couple of prime ministers – and all with something to tell about what Wright calls this 'clean, lean, hungry country'. These books are both, in different ways, loud responses to any accusations of philistinism an ignorant Londoner might level. They're also gorgeous in their own right. Fair dinkum. 'The Literature of Australia', edited by Nicholas José, is published by WW Norton at £35 on Sept 25. 'Icons of the Desert', published by Cornell University Press at £16.50, is out now.

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