

Gadi Mirrabooka

Australian Aboriginal Tales from the Dreaming

Edited by Helen F. McKay
Retold by Pauline E. McLeod,
Francis Firebrace Jones, and
June E. Barker

Illustrations by Francis Firebrace and Helen McKay

2001

Libraries Unlimited
A Division of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
Englewood, Colorado

Copyright © 2001 Helen F. McKay, Pauline E. McLeod, Francis Firebrace Jones, and
June E. Barker
All Rights Reserved
Printed in the United States of America

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Libraries Unlimited
A Division of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
P.O. Box 6633
Englewood, CO 80155-6633
1-800-237-6124
www.lu.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gadi mirrabooka : Australian aboriginal tales from the dreaming / Helen F. McKay,
editor ; [told by] Pauline E. McLeod, Francis Firebrace Jones, June E. Barker ;
illustrations by Francis Firebrace and Helen McKay.

p. cm. -- (World folklore series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56308-923-8

1. Australian aborigines--Folklore. 2. Mythology, Australian aboriginal. 3.
Legends--Australia. 4. Dreamtime (Australian aboriginal mythology) I. Title: Australian
aboriginal tales from the dreaming. II. McKay, Helen F. III. Series.


GR336.A87 G33 2001

398.2'089'9915--dc21


2001038271

Gadi Mirrabooka


World Folklore Advisory Board

 Simon J. Bronner, Ph.D.


Distinguished Professor of Folklore and American Studies
Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg

 Joseph Bruchac, Ph.D.


Abenaki Storyteller and Writer

 Natalie O. Kononenko, Ph.D.

Professor of Slavic Language and Literature
University of Virginia

 Norma J. Livo, Ed.D.

Writer and Storyteller

 Margaret Read MacDonald, Ph.D.

King County Library System

World Folklore Series

Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. By Norma J. Livo and Dia Cha.

Images of a People: Tlingit Myths and Legends. By Mary Helen Pelton and Jacqueline DiGennaro.

Hyena and the Moon: Stories to Tell From Kenya. By Heather McNeil.

The Corn Woman: Stories and Legends of the Hispanic Southwest. Retold by Angel Vigil.

Thai Tales: Folktales of Thailand. Retold by Supaporn Vathanaprida. Edited by Margaret Read MacDonald.

In Days Gone By: Folklore and Traditions of the Pennsylvania Dutch. By Audrey Burie Kirchner and Margaret R. Tassia.

From the Mango Tree and Other Folktales from Nepal. By Kavita Ram Shrestha and Sarah Lamstein.

Why Ostriches Don't Fly and Other Tales from the African Bush. By I. Murphy Lewis.

The Magic Egg and Other Tales from Ukraine. Retold by Barbara J. Suwyn. Edited by Natalie O. Kononenko.

When Night Falls, Kric! Krac! Haitian Folktales. By Liliane Nerette Louis. Edited by Fred J. Hay.

Jasmine and Coconuts: South Indian Tales. By Cathy Spagnoli and Paramasivam Samanna.

The Enchanted Wood and Other Folktales from Finland. By Norma J. Livo and George O. Livo.

A Tiger by the Tail and Other Stories from the Heart of Korea. Retold by Lindy Soon Curry. Edited by Chan-eung Park.

The Eagle on the Cactus: Traditional Stories from Mexico. Retold by Angel Vigil.

Tales from the Heart of the Balkans. Retold by Bonnie C. Marshall. Edited by Vasa D. Mihailovich.

The Celtic Breeze: Stories of the Otherworld from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. By Heather McNeil.

Gadi Mirrabooka: Australian Aboriginal Tales from the Dreaming. Retold by Pauline E. McLeod, Francis Firebrace Jones, and June E. Barker. Edited by Helen F. McKay

Selections Available on Audiocassette

Hyena and the Moon: Stories to Tell From Kenya. By Heather McNeil.

The Corn Woman: Stories and Legends of the Hispanic Southwest. Retold by Angel Vigil.

Thai Tales: Folktales of Thailand. Retold by Supaporn Vathanaprida. Edited by Margaret Read MacDonald.

Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. By Norma J. Livo and Dia Cha.

I dedicate this book to the Australian Aboriginal nations, whose stories from the Dreaming bestow wisdom and spiritual values that can inspire and enrich all of our lives.

Helen F. McKay



Acknowledgments

To all those who have assisted me with information and encouragement, I offer my sincere appreciation. As always, writing in collaboration with others is never an easy process.

Special thanks go to the three Aboriginal storytelling custodians, Pauline McLeod, June Barker, and Francis Firebrace, who were always able to explain and assist in areas where I was having difficulties. Thanks to Francis Firebrace for his wonderful paintings of the stories he tells.

I am deeply indebted to Berice Dudley, who has always been willing to assist in editing my work, generously giving me her support and keeping me on track, especially when I became quite ill, during the last two years. She inspired me to keep plugging on.

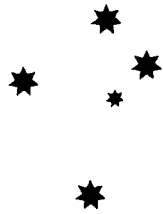
I thank my friend Mary Locke for the loan of so many of her library of books and her cheerful encouragement whenever I hit a frustration low. And I appreciate the encouragement and support of my “mate,” storyteller Margaret MacDonald in Seattle, whose e-mails uplifted me during stressful episodes.

Thanks and my deep appreciation to Ken McKay for his technical assistance. Whenever the computer hiccuped, I froze along with the computer, but he didn't.

The Toongabbie Takeaway gets my sincere appreciation for the hot and nourishing meals, which kept me out of the kitchen and allowed me to continue writing.

The patience and understanding of editor Barbara Ittner in Colorado—the other side of the world from Australia—are much appreciated. Her faith in me was inspiring.

Helen McKay



Introduction

Gadi Mirrabooka, which means “below the Southern Cross,” contains thirty-three Dreaming stories from the Australian Aboriginal culture, recognized as the oldest continuous culture on Earth. The stories in this collection, unlike many previous collections of Aboriginal stories, are told by Aboriginal storyteller custodians.

In the past, people have gathered, plundered, and published books of Aboriginal stories, regardless of whether they were secret stories for use in initiation rites or intended for public use. This was usually done without first seeking permission to use them. In many cases, a number of these stories were altered—or sanitized—to suit the prevailing sensitivities and values of the era. These acts deeply offended the Aboriginal people.

The storytellers who have shared stories for *Gadi Mirrabooka* are all respected Aboriginal cultural educators who use their knowledge to educate their younger generations as well as the wider Australian community. The stories have not been altered or sanitized for specific audiences but are authentic oral stories, passed down through many generations. All have been approved for public telling.

The Dreamtime, the period of creation before time as we know it existed, is known to the Aboriginal people as the Dreaming, where the very essence of human nature came to be understood. The lessons of this period of enlightenment, the ability to live in peace and harmony with all around us, are encapsulated within the Dreaming and passed on to the next generation in the oral tradition.

Dreamtime is a word first used by an anthropologist in the early 1900s to define what he saw as a religion. He used this word to describe the all-encompassing mystical period of Aboriginal beginning. However, the Aboriginal people did not and do not worship any single deity or other god. They built no monoliths, memorials, or idols, nor did they have an organized religion. They lived by the lores of the various creators and ancestral spirits of the diverse landscapes, the sky, the creatures, and the plants of Australia.

The art, stories, songs, and dances became well known as part of the Dreamtime, but they are still little understood and very hard to explain. The Dreamtime is part of the oral tradition and is only one aspect of the very complex spiritual belief system.

The Dreamtime stories are the verbal form of the spiritual Dreaming, which comprises:

- **Art:** the visual form
- **Customs:** the practical form
- **Music:** the acoustic form
- **Totems:** the spiritual form

Lore: the cultural form

Lands: the physical form

Altogether, these aspects form an all-encompassing, mystical whole. Over the course of the past 200 years, since the onset of colonization, non-indigenous people have perceived these art forms as separate entities rather than as part of a whole. The result has been a fragmented overview of the culture.

The stories of the Dreaming are more than myths, legends, fables, parables, or quaint tales. They are definitely *not* fairytales for the amusement of children. Down through generations, the Aboriginal people's stories, told but never written down, were the oral textbooks of their accumulated knowledge, spirituality, and wisdom, from when time began.

The structure and form of a traditional Dreaming story is quite unique and cannot easily be copied. An oral Dreaming story of ten minutes' length can cover several topics and subject matters and be suitable for all age groups. They are structured with valuable lessons for children or for bringing a renewed understanding to older people.

Twenty or more lessons can be found in one story, teaching such topics and subject matters as

- The spiritual belief system,
- Customs,
- Animal behavior and psychology,
- Land maps of the region,
- Hunting and gathering skills,
- Cultural norms,
- Moral behaviors,
- Survival skills, and
- Food resources.

For example, the stories "Brolga" (number 23) and "First Platypus" (number 10) are excellent examples of "stranger danger," and "Murray Cod" (number 4) is a "creation map" story.

Every genre of storytelling and hundreds of categories are used in the Dreaming stories, such as

- Babies', older children's, and adult stories;
- Women's stories, both public and secret;
- Men's stories, both public and secret;
- Love, comedy, tragedy, and horror stories;
- Parables and sacred stories, both public and secret; and
- Mystical stories.

The Dreaming stories are not specifically related to time, because time was not important for the story to become part of the oral tradition. The important issue was the event that occurred and affected the people, the land, and the culture.

Research into animals, described in traditional Dreaming stories, corroborates the existence of these creatures of the Creation and megafauna, which existed in other periods of world history. Many of these animals are now extinct, but their remains have been discovered by archaeologists. Some examples of these Dreaming stories are

- Stories about giant lizards of the dinosaur period,
- The story about the birth of the platypus at least 1 million years ago,
- Stories about giant kangaroos that lived at least 15,000 years ago,
- The Dreaming story about the Devil Dingo, which lived at least 5,000 years ago,
- Stories about the invention of a weapon, the boomerang, at least 15,000 to 25,000 years ago,
- The Dreaming story about how death came into the world, and
- The Dreaming story about the birth of the sun.

Many of the Dreaming stories refer to an Aboriginal group's creation time, for example, "Rainbow Serpent Dreaming" or "Honey Ant Dreaming" (not in this book). Their ancestor spirits arrived here at the time of creation in human and animal spirit form and are now encapsulated in the stories of the Dreaming associated with each particular group of people.

New Dreaming stories are being continually added to those already in existence. Stories of islands pushed along by clouds were about the sailing ships of the 1700s, with their strange men from across the seas. The Aboriginal people perceived them as ghosts or evil spirits, but they were actually the colonists who arrived between 1788 and the 1950s.

Tales abounded of hoofed, four-footed, monstrous creatures with two heads that stank like bunyips (water demons) and defiled nature: men on horses. Stories were told of other objects that could only be described by the sounds they made. There is no word in any Aboriginal language that could describe such a creature. They were known as "chuggasshhhh-chuggasshhhhh" and were the early paddle steamers on the Murray River. The stories of the "flying ships" of sixty years ago—the airplanes of the 1940s—totally amazed and terrified the people of the interior, who had never seen them.

The most recent Dreaming stories are of "the black cloud of Maralinga," the atomic testing grounds of the 1950s, "deaths in custody," and "removed or stolen children," a time better known to the Aboriginal people as the Screamtime, Nightmare period of history. (These stories are not included in this book because of the complex nature of issues.)

The lessons in a Dreaming story are not taught directly but are assimilated by repetition. Understanding of the story is acquired from life experiences as a person grows to maturity. When the time comes for that person to keep the oral tradition alive by passing the stories on in their entirety to the next generation, it can be done correctly and without distortion.

In the retelling of a Dreaming story, the traditional Aboriginal oral storyteller can use virtually every form of theatre known to pass on the culture, unlike the Irish Seanachie, who just sits and tells the story. This telling can take the form of a solo performer or troupes, using music, song, or simply telling without aids.

In addition, the story may be told in plays, pantomime, dances, and the visual art forms, which often accompany the telling. Facial expressions, hand movements, vocal variety, and mime—both vocal and physical—were, and still are, very important in the presentation of a Dreaming story. There are strict requirements for a traditional storyteller, imposed by the elders, regarding an individual's personal knowledge of cultural laws and custodianship.

Symbolic languages, such as the map-like dot pictures and cave paintings and carvings, were used throughout Aboriginal Australia to record information. A written language was never developed or used. There is no universal Aboriginal language; there are approximately 700 Aboriginal tribal groups, each with its own dialect. On top of this, there are regional languages common to many groups within a region, such as the Murray River basin region or Kimberley.

According to the land regions and the habitat of the creatures being described in a story, there are as many different versions of a core story as there are tribes. These may differ in that the creatures in the story may be changed to fit the regional landscape of swamps, rivers, mountains, plains, or coastal land areas.

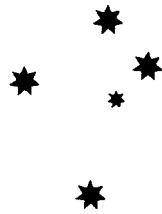
Since time began, the Aboriginal people have been in Australia. The original people lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle based on their oral tradition and existence as hunters and gatherers, trading or bartering their excess produce. Wherever these groups gathered, whether for trade or tribal ceremonies, stories were exchanged and information offered about the presence of animals for hunting, as well as about other food sources.

The Aboriginal people do not believe in land ownership; rather, they see themselves as custodians of the land mass known as Australia. They believe the time has now come for the Aboriginal people, who have survived many changes, both natural and human-made, to share not only their culture but also the wisdom and experience of the Dreaming. The elders have given permission for stories, including some previously secret stories from the Dreaming, to be disseminated.

Through these stories, which teach us to care for the land and one another, we catch glimpses of the great diversity within Australia—of its people, animals, and landforms. The stories in this book offer a comprehensive glimpse of the Dreamtime.

Included in this book are stories from many vastly different regions of Australia. There are stories of the Creation, spirits, diverse languages, and, of course, the constellations, the stars of the Southern Cross and Milky Way. There are creation stories, animal stories, map stories, a space story, love stories, heroic stories (some with strong moral values), and stories that warn of dangers. They have been collected from all over Australia to allow the reader to understand more about the oldest continuous living culture on Earth. The more often you read them, the better you will understand the messages they contain.

Stories from the Dreaming, or the First Time, are the cultural property of the Australian Aborigines. To pass them on without first obtaining permission from the traditional owners would, in those owners' eyes, be stealing. If you find an Aboriginal story that is not in this book, you should first identify its source and try to obtain permission to tell it. We have received permission from the traditional owners for the Aboriginal contributors to share all the stories in this collection. Read each of them once for enjoyment, a second time for information, and a third time for understanding of the values and lessons it carries.



Contents

Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	xv

Part 1: Australia and the Aboriginal People

Overview of Australia	3
Geography: The Land	3
The Geographic Regions	4
How Climate Affected the Aborigines	6
The Megafauna	7
The Fauna	8
The Flora	10
The Aboriginal People	13
The People and the Land	13
Walkabout	15
The Corroboree	17
Ceremonial Walkabouts	17
Trade	18
Transportation	18
Customs: The Totemic System	19
The Arts	20
Aboriginal Art	20
Storytelling	21
Music	23
Other Instruments	23
Dance	24
Education	24
Language	26
Impact of Europeans on the Language	26

Recent History	29
Early Visitors	29
European Invasion and Colonization	29
Story of a Removed Child.....	31
Reconciliation	32

Part 2: The Tales

1. Mirrabooka: A Story About the Southern Cross	37
2. The Beginning Island: A Creation Story from the First Time, When Tasmania Was Born.....	39
3. Lumerai, the Mother Snake: A Rainbow Serpent Creation Story from the Northern Territory	41
4. The Murray Cod: A Creation Map Story from the Murray River Basin on the Border of New South Wales and Victoria.....	43
5. Boomerang: Alinga, the Lizard Man: A Story from Uluru (Ayers Rock) in the Northern Territory	45
6. The Birth of the Butterflies: A Story of When Death First Came to the Land, from the Murray River, New South Wales.....	47
7. Why the Kookaburra Laughs: A Wiradjuri Creation Story from New South Wales ...	50
8. The Whale Man and His Canoe: A Story from the Northern Territory	53
9. How the Birds Got Their Colors: A Wiradjuri Story from New South Wales.....	55
10. First Platypus, Gaygar—The Little Mother Duck: A Creation Story from the Top End of the Darling River Region, Northern New South Wales	57
11. How the Kangaroo Got Her Pouch: A Wiradjuri Story from New South Wales....	61
12. The Little Flying Fox: A Creation Story from New South Wales North Coast.....	64
13. How Koolah the Koala Lost His Tail: A Story from Northwestern New South Wales	66
14. Pikkuw, the Crocodile: A Story from the Cape York Area of Northern Queensland	69
15. Goolbree—How the Emu Lost Its Wings: A Story from Northwestern New South Wales	71
16. The Story of the Didgeridoo: A Story from the Gulf Country of the Northern Territory	73
17. How the Night Owl Came To Be: A Story from Northwest New South Wales	75

18. Myee, the Bogong Moth Woman: A Story from the Albury Region of New South Wales	78
19. Frog and the Lyrebird: A Story from the People of the Blue Mountains	80
20. The Special Platypus: A Story from New South Wales Central Coast.	83
21. Tidalick: A Story from the Murray River Region of New South Wales	86
22. Wayambah, the Turtle: A Story from Northwestern New South Wales.	89
23. Brolga, the Dancing Bird: A Story from the Mutti Mutti People of Lake Mungo and the Darling Basin.	91
24. The Bunyip in the Forest: An Original Scary Story from Victoria.	93
25. The Little Koala and the Bunyip: A Story from Queensland	95
26. The Min Min Light: A Space Story from Northwestern New South Wales.	97
27. Djididjidi and Kuburi: A Story from the Kimberley, a Region of Western Australia . .	100
28. Marmoo and Biamee: A Creation Story from New South Wales.	102
29. Belah, the Sun Woman: A Story from the Flinders Ranges of South Australia. . . .	104
30. The Sturt Desert Pea: A Story from Around Lake Eyre in South Australia.	106
31. The Fire Keeper: A Story from the Northern Territory Area	108
32. The First Waratah: A Love Story from the Illawarra Region of the South Coast of New South Wales.	110
33. Girilambone, Place of Falling Stars: A Story from Northern New South Wales . . .	112
Glossary	115
Bibliography	121
About the Editor and Contributors	123
Index	127

Part 1

Australia and the Aboriginal People



