**Interview with Dr Anita Heiss**

*In your memoir “Am I Black Enough for You?” you say that the power of language to create identities is extraordinary, and often debilitating. What would you say are the preconceptions Europeans have about Indigenous Australians?*

I used to co-teach an Introduction to Indigenous Studies course at Macquarie University. Most of my 200+ students were internationals who arrived with pre-conceived ideas and stereotypes about Aboriginal people. Thanks to us being left out of contemporary literature and typecast in most films, they never expected to see us as professors, business-people, and city-dwellers nor as a contemporary, diverse and vibrant community. But, expecting us to remain static as a people and not evolve like other societies, demonstrates a level of ignorance of those who view us from the outside.

I think many Europeans are far removed from our realities because of the distance of geography not allowing for a practical experience. Added to that is the limited or archaic view that is perpetuated through an academic and/or anthropological approach that westerners the world over take when considering First Nations people generally.

*What is your message to European audiences that wish to learn more about Aboriginal literature and culture?*

People need to understand that listening to Aboriginal voices and perspectives are crucial to understanding who we are today; our lifestyles, our politics and the diversity of our cultures. These perspectives are delivered through our own media (TV, radio, print, on-line) and literature; autobiographies, novels, poetry, children’s books and plays.

You can access the 5000+ First Nations writers and storytellers via BlackWords: <http://www.austlit.edu.au/specialistDatasets/BlackWords> which is a one-of-its-kind on-line resource. BlackWords is the perfect springboard into your Aboriginal literary and cultural experience.

*You write both fiction and non-fiction. How long does it take you to write a book? Do you know from the outset how each chapter will look like, or does a book take surprise turns while writing?*

That’s an interesting and common question. I’m a plotter in terms of my novels, which means I map out the entire story before I start writing. I know the ending before I begin, and I always complete the bulk of my research before I sit down to write. The research process might take me six months or more. So by the time I start to write in full, the threading of the story is relatively ‘easy’. I say that with caution of course, because writing a novel is not ‘easy’ but it is not the hardest part of the process for me.

I wrote novels like *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Avoiding Mr Right* in about eight weeks each, but I spent weeks ‘on location’ in Melbourne, Manhattan and Canberra for example, getting all the details I needed before I started writing.

The opposite of being a plotter is being a pantser and that is where the writer takes a more organic approach to the story. I can’t imagine being a pantser; for one thing, it would take me five times as long to finish a book.

*You are an Indigenous Literacy Day Ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation (ILF). Can you please tell us about the work you are doing in this function?*

I’m an ILF Ambassador because I simply cannot imagine my world without books, and yet there are many of our most needy without access to books and with no English literacy skills to read them.

My role as Ambassador is simply to raise awareness of the issue of literacy and to raise the profile of the Foundation. I am also heavily involved with National Indigenous Literacy Day, which is on September 3 this year. On that day, there are fundraising events around Australia from schools to libraries to the Sydney Opera House.

The ILF exists thanks to an across industry strategy of goodwill and support between booksellers, publishers, authors and illustrators. And through that goodwill and donations we run a number of community literacy projects, publish books in Aboriginal languages and supply books to communities. We have already put 115,000 books into 230 communities.

On August 31, I will run the Sunshine Coast Half-Marathon (21km) with the aim of raising $10,000 for the ILF. That should buy a lot of books. Here’s our team page: <https://sunshinecoastmarathon2014.everydayhero.com/au/all-stars>

*What are the most effective ways to include Indigenous literature in the curriculum of Australian schools and universities?*

The best way to think about including Indigenous voices and perspectives via literature into any teaching environment is to think inclusively. Do not teach in a vacuum. If you are teaching about Australian involvement in war, be sure and include Aboriginal people and stories in that. Aboriginal people have been involved in every war since the Boer War but it hasn’t been taught to Australian students. There are novels, poems and memoirs that cover aspects of involvement in war. They can easily be used in teaching from primary school through to tertiary level.

If you are teaching on the environment and landscape, include Aboriginal sustainability practices and notions of country – there is a wealth of information out there, including children’s picture books. It’s just a matter of keeping Indigenous perspectives on your own radar and sometimes thinking outside the box.

*Can you tell us more about your Austrian heritage and your connections to Austria?*

My father was born in 1936 in St Michael, in the Lungau region of Salzburg. The eldest son of Josef and Maria Heiss, he was one of seven children. I first visited St Michael in 1977 and have since returned a number of times (but not since my father passed away in 2005). I have family in Bregenz and visited there in 2009, and some of my Heiss family have come to Australia to visit in the past decade. I look forward to returning to Vienna in 2015 and have some ideas about setting a book in my father’s homeland.

*Thank you so much for taking the time to answer our questions*.