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Jacki Ferro

Alice's Daughter: Co-writing for Recognition, Recovery and Reconciliation

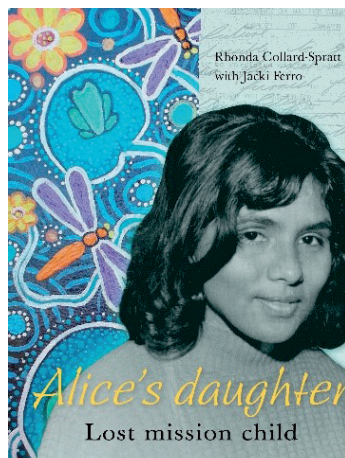


Fig. 1. *Alice's Daughter: Lost Mission Child* by Rhonda Collard-Spratt with Jacki Ferro (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017).

Book Synopsis and Memoir Co-writing Overview

In 1954, aged three, Rhonda Spratt was taken from her Aboriginal mother and placed on Carnarvon Native Mission in remote Western Australia. Growing up in the white world of chores and aprons, religious teachings and cruel beatings, Rhonda drew strength and healing from her mission brothers and sisters, her art, music and poetry, and her unbreakable bond with the Dreaming. In Rhonda's own words:

I lived my early years on a native mission in Western Australia – growing up without a mother's love. I was always searching for my people's language, dance, songs and stories. I went on to find some family, my culture, my identity and ultimately myself. In writing this book, I wanted to speak about what happened to us as a people, on a human level, through the eyes of a child (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: xi).

Co-written with memoirist Jacki Ferro, *Alice's Daughter: Lost Mission Child* (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017) is the story of Rhonda's search for culture and family as she faces sexual and physical violence, racism, foster families, and her father's death in custody. The memoir maintains Rhonda's point of view by incorporating Rhonda's verbal storytelling and poetry, and adapts original documents gathered through FOI (Freedom of Information), including correspondence between the government and Alice Spratt (Rhonda's mother), police reports relating to Rhonda's violent encounter with the Western Australian police force's Tactical Response Group, court documents, a national enquiry report into her father's death in custody in 1983, media articles, and interviews with other witnesses. The result is an engaging, accessible narrative, supported by significant research, photographs, and official records. Endnotes and a glossary of Aboriginal language and Australian-English terms further inform the reader of Australia's recent political interracial history and policies, and provide insight into the language and culture of the world's oldest Indigenous people. The book is particularly topical given the current world-wide 'Black Lives Matter' and 'Me Too' campaigns.

A major theme of *Alice's Daughter* is the phenomenon of 'Connection to Country' (Common Ground n.d.), which is central to Aboriginal people's belief system, identity, and culture. Through Rhonda's vibrant storytelling, artwork and poetry, readers begin to

understand the depth of this connection. The white settlers' belief that Australia was 'Terra Nullius' or 'a land belonging to no one' (Oxford University Press 2010) led to subsequent Protectionist era policies in every Australian State and Territory. These policies placed Aboriginal people on reserves and missions, denied them access to traditional hunting and gathering grounds, and forbade cultural rituals and the speaking of native languages that connected Aboriginal people to their 'Country' (particular tribal area), families and communities.

These policies, together with State-based child removal policies from 1910-1970, saw several generations of Aboriginal children across Australia, particularly those of mixed descent, taken from their parents and placed in white foster homes, reserves, missions, orphanages and hostels. The result was a loss of familial and community ties, and Aboriginal languages and cultural practices (HREOC 1997). Still today, the impacts of these policies on the so-called 'Stolen Generations' include a loss of wellbeing, poor mental health, lack of identity, and an inability to form loving, close relationships.

The co-writing of *Alice's Daughter* involved synthesising the disciplines of visual art, verbal storytelling, poetry, archival research, policy research, interviewing, media articles, etymology, community development, social planning, psychology, and memoir writing.

The Co-writing Journey

Prior to meeting Rhonda Collard-Spratt, Jacki Ferro worked for twenty years in health education and promotion and community development. In 2012, while managing an art mentoring program for Aboriginal people at a local community centre, the two met, and Rhonda shared the story of the time when she was twelve years old and first met her mother Alice, for five minutes. This led to Jacki's agreement to co-write Rhonda's life story.

What began as an exercise in recognising and documenting the extraordinary life of an Aboriginal woman who had been subjected to separation from family, institutionalisation, and dispossession from land, culture and language through a childhood in which she was shown no love, became a close collaboration that led to a process of recovery for Rhonda, and, ultimately, a friendship between Rhonda and Jacki in the true spirit of Reconciliation.

The project grew to involve research that shone a light on the major issues and events that have affected every Aboriginal person in Australia today – namely, police violence, racial discrimination, a disproportionate number of Aboriginal children being placed with white foster families, the National Apology to the Stolen Generations by Prime Minister Rudd in 2008, and the transgenerational trauma of loss and dispossession that Stolen children have passed down to their children.

More than that, through the writing process, Rhonda transformed from a depressed, shy and guarded woman into an increasingly confident and outgoing personality, proud to speak out about injustices against her people. Rhonda found healing and recovery through sharing the stories of her past and, ultimately, she has accepted and thrives in her role as a proud representative of the mission children of the Stolen Generations, officiating at National Sorry Day events, and speaking on national radio and television and in other media in Australia.

Verbal Storytelling

For one day each week, for two-and-a-half years from February 2013, Rhonda shared with Jacki the stories and anecdotes of events from her life. Rhonda's natural storytelling ability is endemic to her culture and personality, and this talent extends to developing characters and bringing both humour and tragedy to scenes with equal vividness. In developing the narrative, Rhonda would tell the stories, while Jacki typed as she talked. Jacki then read back the story aloud, and the pair then adapted each scene to heighten the fun, drama, or gravitas, including inserting relevant dialog. *Alice's Daughter: Lost Mission Child* has readers laughing as Rhonda and her mission sister Susan draw stories in the sand with sticks, and crying as Rhonda relives her vicious and violent gang rape at the age of sixteen.

Poetry

Lost Mother

The land is my lost mother
 I yearn to know and see;
 I slowly walk timidly into her arms
 She caresses and nurtures me.
 Her beautiful fragrance and songs wash over me
 Giving me fresh dreams,
 Filling the emptiness, replacing my worth;
 Sadness and pain buried deep in the earth.
 She whispers and tells me that here I belong;
 Let your spirit be free, let your spirit be strong.
 This land is yours as far as the eyes can see;
 It flows in your blood right down to the sea.
 My spiritual totem she reveals to me
 Emotions of peace, feelings of belonging.
 Her gentle soft tears drop from the sky;
 She is happy for she has found
 Her precious lost child (Collard-Spratt 2017: x).

Rhonda has written poetry throughout her life, and her poems express the heart-breaking toll that separation from her mother had on this young child's emotional and mental health. After writing her memoir, the two authors looked to Rhonda's poetry, and inserted selected poems at key points throughout the book where they reflected particular emotions or events.

Rhonda's poetry distils her profound emotions, and enlightens us further about Aboriginal culture and experience. Examples include *Lost Mother*, which expresses Rhonda's deep sadness at growing up separated from her mother (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: x), *The River*, which describes Rhonda's loss of connection to her Country and culture (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 12), *Lost Child*, a poem about the cruelty of the white missionaries who ruled Rhonda's life from the age of three to sixteen years (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 44),

Payback, about Rhonda's anger towards police at the injustices against Aboriginal people due to the colour of their skin (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 98), and *Emotionally Dead*, which exposes the depression that gripped Rhonda for many years as a result of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) from events during both childhood and adulthood (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 86).

Incorporating Research

Rhonda had already gathered many official government records about her mother, Alice Spratt, through Freedom of Information. The authors applied for documents relating to Rhonda's own life through FOI of the Department of Child Protection in Western Australia. Surprisingly, many of Rhonda's documents arrived with large sections redacted by government officials, such as details regarding who had admitted Rhonda into care at the mission in 1954, and the address of her parents. In compiling the memoir, the authors selected certain documents to scan, such as the 'Report on Inmate', Rhonda's school report card from 1964 (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 28), and others to transcribe (due to illegibility), such as a letter from Rhonda's mother Alice Spratt to the government, pleading to buy a green swimsuit with her own money, dated 1950 (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 2).

Including original historical documents was important, in order to counter claims by certain Australian politicians and other outspoken right-wing Australian personalities who, in recent years, had questioned the existence of the Stolen Generations (Huffadine 2016). The authors wanted to prove, through verified documents, that these events happened to Rhonda and her family, and to highlight the racist language of the times that indicated the institutionalised racism of the Australian government towards Aboriginal people. For example, on page 116, Alice Spratt's 'Application for Australian citizenship' in 1958 is included. Aboriginal people were not considered Australians by birth until a national referendum in 1967. Alice had applied for citizenship so that she could get maternity support payments for her two young sons. The application asks for the 'castes' (ratio of Aboriginality versus white racial background) of herself ('9/16ths') and her parents, father Clarence Spratt ('3/4 caste'), and mother Edna May Belotti ('3/8ths caste'). Alice's initial maternity support application was rejected as the government correspondence indicated that she had 'a preponderance of 1/16 of native blood'. This is an example not only of the racist nature of Australian policies towards Aboriginal people, but it provides an example of when the authors re-phrased this event into Rhonda's own words, so that Aboriginal readers would understand. Rhonda said, "Mum was too black, so she wasn't allowed to receive a maternity allowance unless she became an Australian citizen". In many other instances, key passages from official records were transcribed into wording that reflected how Rhonda speaks, so that the entire book, *Alice's Daughter*, remains consistently written in Rhonda's distinctive voice.

Larger passages where events using government correspondence and documents were re-written into Rhonda's voice include most of *Chapter 9 The brolga and other stories from mother* (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 100-108), and large sections of *Chapter 7 Death in custody* (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 77-87). Chapter 9 opens with Rhonda explaining that her mother, Alice Spratt, came to stay with her for three months in 1993. This setting enabled

the authors to incorporate stories from Alice's childhood, including growing up on Moore River Native Settlement made famous by *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Pilkington Garimara 1996). Government memos and correspondence provided much information around the lives of both Alice Spratt and her father (Rhonda's maternal grandfather) Clarence Spratt. Alice's childhood was even more harsh than her daughter Rhonda's childhood, as Moore River was run by government officials, not missionaries, and punishments were regular and inhumane. Alice had a strong spirit and, as a child, she escaped more than once from the reserve, but was always caught by police and returned. An example of how the authors adapted correspondence relates to the period, after being recaptured, when fourteen-year-old Alice was sent to work as a house servant for white property owners:

Mother worked as a domestic servant at the 'Coolart' property in Walebing. She told me how the Mistress made her wear shoes to serve morning and afternoon teas. Mother had never worn shoes in her life. She tripped and fell, breaking cups and saucers and even their precious crystal.

"Breakages seemed to be the order of the day", wrote the white lady in her complaint letter.

Mother felt continuously growled at, and eventually she ran away. She reported in to the Moora police who took her to the Native Girls' Home in Perth.

Two weeks later, in September 1949, Mother was sent by train to 'Yarrabubba Station' in Meekatharra to again work as a domestic. This job didn't work out either. Six months later, Mother was put back on a train for Perth.

Maybe she got the sack because her boss didn't want to increase her wage as it was up for review by the Commission of Native Affairs. But her boss man wrote, "She is very tired in her work, and doesn't take any interest at all. On top of this she seems too fond of hanging around the men working here, and I don't feel like taking the responsibility of her".

Mother never arrived. Although placed on the train, she failed to report in at the girls' home. She had taken off yet again. A hand-written note on the authorities' memo stated that the train fare would now be 'chargeable' to Alice Spratt herself.

The police eventually caught up with Mother in Geraldton. She was controlled by the 1936 Native Administration Act (WA). This Act meant that the Chief Protector of Aborigines controlled Aboriginal 'children' up to the age of 21. Mother was breaking the white law by being on the run. She told them her next move was most likely to Carnarvon (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 104).

In the above passage, police memos, historical correspondence, and government policies combine with Rhonda's interviews to ensure that, while the facts of when, where

and with whom Alice travelled and worked are accurate, the historical material is worded in Rhonda's voice, as she would say it. For example, "Mother felt continuously growled at".

Chapter 7 *Death in Custody* recounts the circumstances around the suspicious death of Rhonda's father Ronald Mack Ugle in Broome prison in 1983. Ronald's death was a case investigated in 1990 by the National Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Commonwealth of Australia 1990). Rhonda could not bring herself to read the reports about her father's death, so Jacki read them and wrote up a summary of the major points. By this time in the co-writing process, Jacki understood how Rhonda spoke, and so Jacki was able to write this chapter from Rhonda's point of view. The authors interviewed Ronald's prison cellmate on the day of his death, Laurie Tittum, who happened to also be a close childhood friend or 'mission brother' of Rhonda's. Laurie's recollection of the events of the day Ronald died clarified the suspicion that prison officers had not done everything possible to save Ronald's life.

Seven years after his passing, an inquiry was held into my father's death. His case was part of the 1990 National Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The national inquiry was held because a high number of Aboriginal deaths in custody had occurred in WA in the 80s (Beresford 2006). Although the inquiry eventually found that his death was due to a heart attack, according to the submission, my father's death "was caused or contributed to by injuries suffered while in prison".

The report from the inquest found that several days before his death, my father asked authorities if he could go to his brother's funeral. Permission was refused. A fellow prisoner, my mission brother Laurie Tittum, gave evidence that my father was unusually quiet and unhappy in the following days. Denied the emotional release of grieving, my father died on the day of his brother's funeral. Maybe, in part, he died from a broken heart, unable to say his final goodbyes (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 82).

Similarly, in *Chapter 1 A black girl in a white world* and *Chapter 10 Sorry business*, Jacki incorporated passages from both the report from the Commonwealth Government National Enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, the *Bringing Them Home Report* (HREOC 1995), also known as the 'Stolen Children's Report', and the landmark speech of National Apology to the Stolen Generations by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (Rudd 2008), which Rhonda attended in Canberra.

Despite multiple sources of information, *Alice's Daughter* is written in simple and distinctly Aboriginal-Australian language, ensuring its accessibility to Aboriginal readers, from the viewpoint of the subject, Rhonda Spratt. Readers follow little Rhonda's antics with her group of friends, reliving the cruel discipline they encountered, the constant labour of chores, including gathering wood, ironing, preparing meals, and polishing wooden floors, and the incessant practice of Christian worship, while the children's own Aboriginal culture, spirituality, and languages were forcibly prohibited.

A Credible Teaching Resource

Alice's Daughter touches on many of the major issues relating to Aboriginal Australian

history since white settlement – the Stolen Generations, Aboriginal deaths in custody, police violence against Aboriginal people, physical and sexual violence against Aboriginal people, institutional and casual racism in Australia, and the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. Importantly too, the memoir presents ideas around how healing is possible for Aboriginal people, and how social change could lead to greater self-determination for Aboriginal people, and Reconciliation between white and black Australia.

All policies relating to Australian-Indigenous relations are explained and referenced in both the text and endnotes of *Alice's Daughter*. A glossary of Aboriginal language and Australian-English terms at the end of the book provides another teaching tool of interest to those studying Indigenous cultures and languages.



Fig. 2. Rhonda's "mission sisters" collect firewood for Carnarvon Native Mission. Rhonda stands atop the pile in the pink shirt, circa 1963 (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017).

Photographs from Rhonda's childhood in the mission support Rhonda's claims, and will interest readers. Fortuitously, in 1990, Churches of Christ Australia had produced a book in which they published many photos of Rhonda and her mission brothers and sisters at Carnarvon Native Mission (Sewell 1990). Churches of Christ gave the authors permission to re-print these photos in *Alice's Daughter*.

Rhonda's original artwork also attracts readers' attention as it epitomises traditional Aboriginal painting styles and captures memories of events depicted in the story, such as *Rainbow Snake Dancer* (Collard-Spratt & Ferro: 80), which Rhonda painted from memories of her first corroboree when she was aged sixteen.



Fig. 3 Rainbow Snake Dancer by Rhonda Collard-Spratt (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017).

Finally, *Alice's Daughter* provides insight into the mind and heart of an Aboriginal Elder who regained her connection to culture, language and Country after surviving being stolen and living through police and other violence and her father's death in custody. This perspective and historical account is a great teaching tool for all those working in Indigenous communities today across the political, legal, police, foster care, health care, community service, and social planning sectors.

A Tool for Reconciliation

Alice's Daughter has become a representative voice of Australia's first nations people who have maintained their connection to culture and country despite dispossession, separation, and institutionalisation. Although the book recounts many traumatic events, the theme of healing gives readers hope, and the writing process and

subsequent promotion of this book in communities by the two authors together is a living example of the essence of Reconciliation. Rhonda wanted to write her story in order to speak for those who have not found their own voices. Many Aboriginal readers have commented on the authenticity of these events, and have agreed with the psychological fallout that their loveless upbringing has had on their mental health, resulting in their inability to sustain intimate family relationships throughout their lives, and their susceptibility to addiction to alcohol and drugs. Co-author Jacki Ferro pressed Rhonda to explain further how these issues have affected her and her "mission family" today, and to share Rhonda's ideas about how the lives of Aboriginal people in Australia could be improved. In *Chapter 12 Through Yamatji Eyes*, the theme of societal change is highlighted when Rhonda visits Uganda with a choir of Australian singers:

Everywhere they looked, Ugandans could see their own image – in the streets, on posters and billboards, people working in the banks and shops, people the same as them, same skin, same hair. This would give them a feeling of oneness, of not being different, and of thinking they could grow up to fully participate in and lead their communities, and make something of their lives. It would give them a strong sense of belonging, knowing this is their place. To me, this isn't nothing. To me, this is everything and so much more (Collard-Spratt & Ferro 2017: 139).

Rhonda's perspective provides ideas for social planners and policy makers wanting to improve self-determination among Indigenous populations after colonisation.

Is Alice's Daughter Translated into Italian or Other Languages?

Published in English in 2017 by Aboriginal Studies Press (AIATSIS), the authors have successfully and gratefully found translators who have translated the front material of *Alice's Daughter: Lost Mission Child* into both German and Italian (in those respective countries). Academics in Spain have translated the entire text into Catalan, and are currently translating it into Spanish and, with the help of a translator in France, are translating the entire text into French. Despite this, the authors are still seeking a European publisher interested in taking on the project for distribution throughout Europe and other non-English speaking markets world-wide.

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Jacki Ferro (B.Bus.-Comn, GD-Soc. Plan., GC-Arts, Writing, Editing & Publishing) is a qualified writer, editor, public relations professional, and community development worker based in Brisbane, Australia. Since the 1990s, Jacki has run cross-cultural, unifying projects that promote self-determination, community education and social justice. Through her writing and editing business, Raw Memoirs, Jacki co-writes and edits the memoirs of brave, diverse people. Jacki believes in the power of well researched life stories to both educate and entertain.

info@rawmemoirs.com, www.rawmemoirs.com