TEACHERS' NOTES

Always Will Be
Mykaela Saunders

Teachers' notes written by Cara Shipp

OVERVIEW

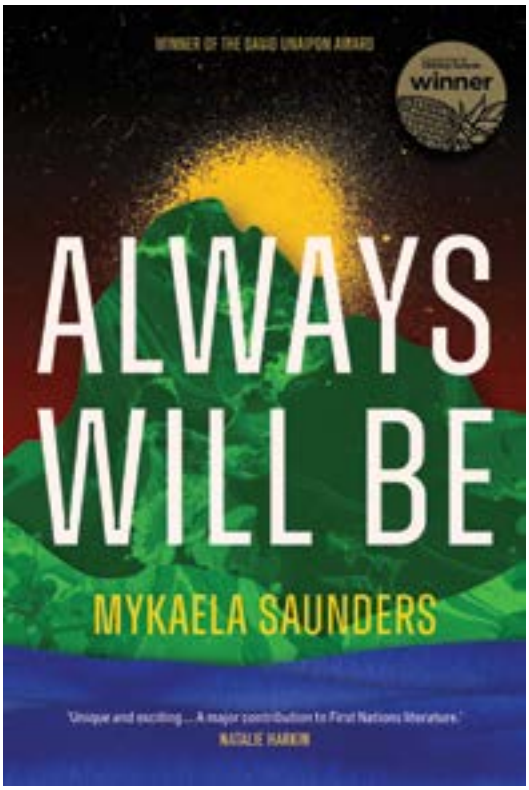
Always Will Be is a collection of short stories coming out of Mykaela Saunders' Doctor of Arts project, *Goori Futurism*, undertaken at the University of Sydney from 2017–2021. The collection is based on the Goori community of Tweed in Northern NSW, part of the Bundjalung nation. This is because Saunders belongs to this community; however, the stories are not based on specific people and they cover themes that relate to many First Nations communities:

> 'I haven't presented any secret or sacred knowledge, I've written generic Goori characters rather than basing them on actual people, and I've written about important themes that concern many blackfellas. I haven't written history, I've imagined futures, and so the cultures in these stories are just as made up as the rest of the world building is' (p. 308).

In the collection, Saunders poses the question: 'what might country, community and culture look like in the Tweed if Gooris reasserted their sovereignty?' (Saunders, 2023). Each story is set in a future version of the Tweed, imagining the possibilities of reclaiming land and sovereignty and adapting to climate change using traditional Goori ways of doing, being and knowing. Most stories focus on Gooris exclusively, some leave room for non-Indigenous people to be part of the new future if they agree to Goori law. Other stories assume non-Indigenous people are gone due to their destruction of the planet and each other: they've either died out or moved to a new planet.

Saunders' aim for the collection is clear:

> 'My cultural responsibilities informed my ethical imperative to write these stories – to give some kind of hope to our jahjums, that no matter what happens, we always will be here' (p. 308).



BOOK DETAILS

C-format paperback | 978 0 7022 6638 6
$32.99

'*Always Will Be* exemplifies the power of literature to both reflect and shape cultural landscapes. Saunders not only contributes to expanding the scope of speculative fiction, but also challenges readers to reconsider whose stories are deemed worthy of speculation and exploration. The stories in *Always Will Be* were crafted with care, respect and humour. They are in equal measures enlightening and entertaining.' ***The Conversation***

The title of this collection fittingly uses part of a well-known Aboriginal rights slogan, 'Always was, always will be Aboriginal land', attributed to Uncle Jim Bates. Saunders quotes Wailwan and Kooma museum director Laura McBride's research on the Barkindji land rights activists, Uncle William and Uncle Jim Bates, during their trips on Country in the 1980s:

> 'Uncle William said, "Dad, it's not your land anymore, whitefellas own it," and Uncle Jim replied, "No, they only borrowed it; it always was, and always will be Aboriginal land."' (Saunders, 2024 p. ix; and see article by McBride at the Australian Museum).

Reading this collection, we can't help but be reminded that First Nations people have inhabited this continent for many thousands of years, through the last Ice Age, earthquakes, meteors, rising sea levels, and changing climates. There is no reason to doubt that First Nations communities won't still be here, belonging to, caring for and being cared for by country for many thousands of years to come.

THEMES AND STRUCTURE

Themes covered in this collection include:

- Goori customs and beliefs (with similarities to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples):
  - → Community
  - → Stories
  - → Spirituality
  - → Connection to country
- Racism in Australia
- Impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the impact of the Stolen Generations
- Identity and belonging; individual experiences of destruction and renewal
- Heritage destruction and renewal
- Climate change and future possibilities for adaptation to climate
- Concepts of 'time' from a First Nations perspective

LANGUAGE

The stories in this collection use some phrases from Bundjalung and Yugambeh languages as well as Aboriginal English. Most are translated in-text or it is easy to gain understanding from the sentence's context.

It is encouraged that teachers allow students to discuss and work out these meanings for themselves, as part of immersing themselves in the Goori world. As renowned Goorie writer

Melissa Lucashenko said when asked why she didn't provide a glossary in her latest book, *Edenglassie*: 'Meaning can be understood with a little work; knowledge is best earned not given' (Melissa Lucashenko, 'Meet the author' event at Australian National University, 12 October 2023).

To support teachers who may feel more comfortable knowing these terms ahead of teaching the book, the following translations are provided:

Bugalbeh – thank you (Bundjalung)
Budoo – penis (urban Aboriginal English)
Dorrying – being nosey (urban Aboriginal English)
Goori – general term for Aboriginal people of the Northern NSW region, within which people identify with particular language groups and tribes such as Bundjalung
Gub/Gubba – white, white people (urban Aboriginal English)
Jahjums – children (Yugambeh)
Jalubay – urine, urinate (Yugambeh–Bundjalung)
Jingeri, Jingi wallah – hello, greetings and welcome phrases from the Yugambeh and Bundjalung languages
Koori – general term for Aboriginal people of NSW and VIC, within which people identify with particular language groups and tribes, such as Dharug
Murri – general term for Aboriginal people of QLD, within which people identify with particular language groups and tribes such as Kombumerri
Tid/Tidda – sister/sister-friend, an expression of sisterhood among women (urban Aboriginal English)
For example, in *The Girls Home*, p. 146: 'Guru ninganah!' says Lani. 'Dandaygambihn wadjilehla yu.'
Guru – stop/never/never mind
Ninganah – quiet/be silent/shut up
Dandaygambihn – old people
Wadjilehla – talking
Yu – exclamation, warning of sudden danger

(Source: Yugambeh–Bundjalung dictionary, in the dictionary book under 'resources'. Note there are protocols around teaching language and this is provided here as a translation reference only; the dictionary publishers, Muurrbay, can support schools in NSW who want to teach language.)

STUDY NOTES

It is difficult to study texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors without an understanding of the geographical, sociopolitical and historical contexts in which the texts sit.

Depending on students' prior knowledge, teachers could guide students in some initial research about these contexts before reading the text. Suggested authentic and culturally appropriate

resources for student research are listed below.

For an overview of Bundjalung country and language, there are a number of maps and videos on the Gambay Indigenous Languages web resource.

Learning about Tweed Goori cultures and histories would best be done in person, on Country, with local Goori community members. If you are able to travel to the Tweed, there are two cultural centres of note to visit:

Minjungbal Museum, Tweed Heads

Tweed Regional Museum, Murwullimbah

For those who can't physically be in the Tweed the following online information is available:

Tweed Aboriginal Cultural Heritage, Tweed Museum

Tweed land, life, culture, Tweed Museum

For an overview of First Nations cultural and historical contexts:

National Museum of Australia 'Collaborating for Indigenous Rights' online resource and timeline.

Muswellbrook Shire online timeline and outline of key eras of pre- and post-colonisation. This was compiled in consultation with the local Aboriginal elders' group.

Black Words Historical Events Calendar – a resource outlining key people and events during various stages of colonised Australia, including the Government Protection Acts leading to removal of children for placement in missions and foster homes (Stolen Generations).

Stolen Generations and Bringing Them Home report: National Museum of Australia resource. NMA Bringing them Home; NMA National Apology.

DISCUSSION POINTS

CONCEPTS OF TIME

Saunders includes a key quote for the epigraph to the book: 'We see our future stretching as far ahead of us as our past does behind us' – Dr Lilla Watson

This prompts the reader to consider concepts of time, which is also the topic of the short story 'Taking Our Time', pp. 11–22.

Common First Nations concepts of time are that it is circular, not linear, and the past, present and future coexist. The Dreaming is an example – it has no start or end, ancestors are always present, the past is always remembered in stories, and knowledge is passed on for future understanding. Anthropologist WEH Stanner coined the term 'everywhen' to try to encapsulate the complexity of this concept: 'One cannot "fix" The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen' (1979, p. 24).

In an interview for her poetry collection guwayu ('still and yet for all times'), Jeanine Leane explains: '"In all cultures, there's a corresponding word that means all times happen simultaneously," she said, underscoring the sense of perpetuity and timelessness intrinsic to all First Nations perspectives.' (Holmes Duffy, 2022). Leane references her elders' wisdom on the use of Wiradjuri language: "The old ones told me the Wiradjuri language didn't split time. Past, present, and future all happen at once." (Holmes Duffy, 2022).

Connected to this non-linear vision of time is the concept of 'deep time'. That is, looking far into the earth's history and far into the future, understanding that we are part of a continual loop of past and future generations.

To explore this further, read and discuss the article *'All things will outlast us': how the Indigenous concept of deep time helps us understand environmental destruction* (Ann McGrath, 2020, published in The Conversation).

Consider these concepts in relation to 'Taking Our Time' (pp.11–22). In particular, discuss:

- The double meaning of the title. The Goori people remember 'before the apocalypse' (colonisation), their own concept of time and how they took their time to live slowly and intentionally, in tune with seasons, following their Dreaming laws (p. 13). This was taken from them at colonisation and 'time' became a symbol of colonisation: clocks, watches, timetables, schedules, calendars all became things that controlled Gooris and separated people from living on country and in tune with country.
- The first clock was brought into the country (p. 14), and 'the old woman' who embodied Country, 'went to sleep because she would not be ruled' (p. 14). This gives a picture of passive

resistance, and suggests the longevity of the earth – that it can stop and sleep through periods of destruction.
- The old woman 'slept right through our bad dream, dreaming ways for us to be sovereign again' (p. 15), sleeping while the colonisers cleared land and began to 'farm with their clocks and fences' (p. 15) – replacing the traditional ways of working with Country to work against it, imposing their version of time on the land.
- Goori people decided to rise against the coloniser by taking their time – stealing all the clocks and timetables, calendars, bells, timers, and any symbols of time used to control people, and burying it all at the foot of their sacred mountain, Wollumbin. During this exercise, we can reflect on how shrugging off time would help all of us live more healthily – Saunders observes how 'retirees come to the Tweed and fling off sixty-five years of time's compression' (p. 16).
- The old woman awoke after the Gooris took back their land by eliminating colonial time, and therefore the colonisers: 'We were ready to really live again, ready to live slowly and cyclically again, ready to live gently and deeply again' (p. 22). Goori people would 'refuse shallow living' and 'remain untimed and untamed' (p. 22).

SPECULATIVE FICTION

This collection continues Saunders' interest in speculative fiction: their previous title, This All Come Back Now (UQP, 2022), is an edited collection of stories by First Nations speculative fiction writers, and Saunders has conducted extensive academic research on the topic.

A feature of First Nations resilience is the imagining of better futures where the current colonial relationships are reshaped, and power and sovereignty are reclaimed. Ambellin Kwaymullina (2017) argues that the themes of war and invasion, followed by rebuilding, apply to both apocalyptic fiction and real colonial histories, and that First Nations people have lived in a kind of apocalypse since colonisation.

Mykaela Saunders posits that 'we are post-apocalyptic and not yet post-colonial, so all those violent histories of invasion and colonisation must be read as apocalyptic by any standard' (Saunders, This All Come Back Now p. 9). Saunders also points out that First Nations spirituality includes belief in the supernatural, time travel, astral projection, and communication between humans, animals and nature: 'to us these stories aren't always parsed out into fiction or fantasy, as they are often just ways we experience life. For example: time travel isn't such a big deal when you belong to a culture that experiences all-times simultaneously, not in a progressive straight line like Western cultures do.' (Saunders, 2022, pp. 9–10).

Consider and discuss these descriptions of First Nations speculative fiction in relation to the stories in this collection, in particular:
- 'Tweed Sanctuary Tour', an ecovillage where Country has been returned to its state 'Before

Cook, BC', where non-Indigenous people can holiday there for free in return for morning labour, and if desired they can take up apprenticeship and be vetted to become citizens.
- 'A Prodigal Return', where Evie returns by stolen spaceship from another planet where humans moved in the belief they had to leave earth to heal. She has learned her culture through video and audio while in space, but now reconnects to Gooris who secretly stayed behind and revived the land, and learns that they have evolved and adapted new cultural practices: 'cultures change' (p. 295).
- 'Blood and Soil', where a principled activist and professor goes off-grid and creates a community connected to Country, teaching their culture to their children. He teaches his son, Jacob, 'too well' (p. 111), and Jacob becomes a sort of dictator, claiming sovereignty, stockpiling weapons, performing a coup and hanging all politicians, developers, police and people who he sees as guilty of continuing colonisation. The story ends with the image of Jacob sitting on a throne like a king, while 'the ghost of his father was turning in his grave' (p. 116).

Are these totally positive futures? In what ways are they positive and in what ways could they be seen as perpetuating colonial practices? Consider:
- 'Blood and Soil' as a violent repeat of colonial actions
- 'A Prodigal Return' where some Gooris remained on earth and some were separated in the exodus to another planet, but Evie is called back to Country to properly learn culture – repeating the separation of families created by the Stolen Generations (but positive for those Gooris who stayed behind and revived their Country in peace, without the colonisers controlling them)
- 'Tweed Sanctuary Tour', where culture and living on Country is confined to a sanctuary, almost like protecting Gooris from the external world, and remembering that missions were set up by Governments under the guise of protection during the 'protection era'. Is this different because it is Goori owned and operated? Are they empowered and self-reliant?

Discuss the idea that while better futures can be imagined, it is difficult to achieve 'utopia'.

CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

All the stories in this collection connect with this theme in some way. Here is a selection to consider:

- 'River Story' pp. 59–77

The importance of the river is highlighted in many ways throughout this story:

- in Gracey's mum's dreams as she drifts in and out of consciousness on her death bed – going fishing to get some dinner to welcome her daughter home, p. 62; making the campfire and

gutting the fish, p. 63
- in the description of Gracey's river birth, pp. 69–70
- when the river is drained by developers, Juna can no longer fish and turns to drinking and smoking, p. 72
- Gracey brings river water to her mother every afternoon, wetting her face with it, p. 73
- Gracey and her family swim in the river after scattering her mother's ashes in the river and saying farewell, p. 77

The river is a healer and a life-giver. Discuss its power and significance to Gracey and Juna.

Also, discuss the vivid imagery, particularly in Juna's mind as she imagines fishing and preparing the fish: the rooms of her brain, the memories exploding out of her skull (pp. 62–64).

Another point for discussion is the love and community of the birthing scene (pp. 69–71) and the funeral ceremony (p. 76). Compare this to the beliefs perpetuated by government during the protection era that Aboriginal parents were unfit and their children were neglected, and that they wouldn't mourn their stolen children.

- 'No Country for Old Women', pp. 23–41

The main character is a woman living self-sufficiently in the hills behind the Tweed, chased away by the overdevelopment of the region.

- she camps, bathes in the river, grows veggies and kills her own food. We read a vivid description of her killing a pig, bleeding it out and pouring the blood onto the garden to fertilise it, showing how sustainably she lives and how every part of an animal is used and re-used (p. 26).
- she is bitten by a snake and has no way to seek help; she prepares to die on Country. She has no regrets about choosing a life close to nature (pp. 39–40).
- her daughter finds her via video phone on a drone, and calls an ambulance. She then sees an eagle gliding above her as she awaits help, suggesting that Country is looking after her because she has looked after Country (p. 41).

Discuss the pros and cons of living 'off-grid', and how she describes the life her kids are living down in the city.

Discuss how her connection to Country may have saved her; also that the technology she so shunned helped in connecting her to help. In what other ways might technology be useful to us in a sustainable future? Are sustainability and technology mutually exclusive? Consider technological advances in sustainable farming, AgTech.

- Compare 'Terranora', 'Cyclone Season' and 'Cold Coast' as examples of Gooris adapting to

climate change. Also 'Kinship Festival' set a few hundred years from now, after another ice age, adapting culture but still retaining the cultural practices we know today and of ancient days before.

PERSONAL STORIES OF RENEWAL, REVIVAL AND SURVIVAL

Some of the stories are simply about what happens when a person is given the chance to change and improve, leaving behind old practices that no longer serve them.

- 'A Guided Meditation for Motivation and Metamorphosis', p. 45 – a young man is released from prison and starts a new life, living at home with his dad and trying to stay off drugs. The story is narrated to the young man, addressing him as 'you'. This could be any young man's experience, especially one who grew up within poverty and intergenerational trauma like many Aboriginal people. The only characters with names in this story are the ones with authority – the parole officer/community liaison, Terry; and the science teacher the young man remembers from school, Ms Azure. The young man is trying to lay down new, healthy habits, such as running each morning. He is fifteen days in, and according to a science documentary he watches, he has another fifteen days to cement his new habit.
- 'Fire Bug', pp. 79–98 – a young troubled Aboriginal boy attends a ranger camp as part of a Year 9 school trip. He is motivated to learn for the first time in a long time, and the rangers discover his love for fire. In Aboriginal ways, a person's passion is encouraged so that they can become the experts in that knowledge for their community: 'we structure education around their passion' (p. 95). Finding Tyson illegally and irresponsibly trying to light a secret fire, instead of punishing him the rangers make a contract with him and his father. He will spend his weekends with them learning about fire and how to use it in the proper cultural way. This represents a major turning point for Tyson, which sets him on a path to a better future, and improves his relationship with his dad, who would 'flog' him if he'd been reported as being in trouble at school (p. 89).

Discuss the difference it makes to a person to have a community around them supporting them to improve themselves, and the importance of maintaining connection to community, family and Country in order to become strong and confident citizens.

CREATIVE WRITING AND LANGUAGE FEATURES

'A Prodigal Return' can be paired for study with 'Our Future in the Stars', as both explore the possibility of humans deciding to leave the planet and live in space while the earth recovers from human destruction. Both stories include good examples of imagery and descriptive language. Students could write an original short-story response considering another aspect of this topic of relocating humans into space.

EXTENSION

Read 'The Girls Home' and discuss the experiences the girls have of being domestic servants kept in dormitories like their great-grandmothers and grandmothers had experienced.

Compare this story to two poems in the poetry collection *Fire Front* (UQP, 2020), edited by Alison Whittaker:

- 'Domestic' by Natalie Harkin. Harkin uses historical records about Aboriginal servants and their treatment by non-Indigenous 'bosses', and her epigraphs cite that such documents 'illuminate a deeply-rooted racist facet of Australian history' and that Aboriginal servants were 'as near to slavery as it is possible to find' (p. 20).
- Alison Whittaker further reflects on this history in her poem 'Many girls white linen' (p. 57).

Consider:

- in what ways does the experience of the Aboriginal domestic servant cut to the heart of the racism and oppression of colonial Australia?
- how can we best ensure this past is never forgotten? Is the VR simulation the girls were put through in 'The Girls Home' ethical? Is this the best way to ensure the continuation of these stories and this memory? Should the experience be extended to non-Indigenous people?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Mykaela Saunders is a Koori/Goori and Lebanese writer, teacher and researcher, and the editor of *This All Come Back Now*, the Aurealis Award–winning, world-first anthology of blackfella speculative fiction (UQP, 2022). *Always Will Be* won the 2022 David Unaipon Award. Mykaela's novel manuscript *Last Rites of Spring* was also shortlisted for the Unaipon Award in 2020, and received a Next Chapter Fellowship in 2021. Mykaela has won the *ABR* Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Indigenous Poetry Prize, the National Indigenous Story Award, the Grace Marion Wilson Emerging Writers Prize for creative non-fiction and the University of Sydney's Sister Alison Bush Graduate Medal for Indigenous research. Of Dharug descent, Mykaela belongs to the Tweed Goori community through her Bundjalung and South Sea Islander family. Mykaela has worked in Aboriginal education since 2003, and at the tertiary level since 2012. They are currently an Indigenous postdoctoral fellow at Macquarie University, researching First Nations speculative fiction.

ABOUT CARA SHIPP

Cara Shipp is a Wiradjuri/Welsh woman (descending from the Lamb and Shipp families in Central Western NSW) and is Head of Senior Campus at Silkwood School, Mount Nathan, in the Gold Coast hinterland. She has previously run alternative educational programs for Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander students; held Head Teacher English/HASS/Languages positions; and served as President, Vice President and Editor with the ACT Association for the Teaching of English (ACTATE). Cara has completed a Masters degree in Education, focusing on Aboriginal literacy, and regularly presents cultural competence training at local and National conferences, particularly within the context of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the English curriculum. In 2013, Cara was part of the ACARA working party on incorporating the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-curriculum priority into the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.