

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

SERIES 5

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST  
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



## RUBY LANGFORD GINIBI

WRITER



# RUBY LANGFORD GINIBI (1934- )

## INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of *Australian Biography* (Series 5) produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

## SYNOPSIS

The life of Ruby Langford Ginibi is a story of triumph against the odds. She was born in 1934 on a mission station in the northern New South Wales town of Coraki. Her tribal name *Ginibi* ('black swan') was given to her in later life by an aunt, an elder of Ruby's Bundjalung people.

When she was six years old, her mother suddenly left the family. She was not to see her again until, in her teens, Langford met her mother by chance in a Sydney street.

Her father took the family to live with relatives and she now remembers this period as one of the happiest times of her life. Certainly it was the most settled.

At the age of 16 Ruby embarked on the first of four tumultuous relationships. She was to marry only one of these men, Peter Langford. She had her first child at 17 and went on to raise nine children, often on her own, and working as a fencer, cleaner and machinist.

Ruby has had more than her share of heartbreak. Her daughter Pearl and son Bill died in accidents within a year of each other. Her son David died of a drug overdose while another son, Nobby, has spent almost half his life in correctional institutions.

In 1984, after shaking off an alcohol addiction, Ruby wrote her autobiography *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, which won the 1988 Human Rights Literary Award. She followed this with *Real Deadly*, a collection of short stories, then *My Bundjalung People*, a revisiting of the scenes of Ruby's youth which took her on a 20,000-kilometre odyssey to her tribal heartlands. Since recording this interview she has published further books.

Ruby now lives in Sydney and is active in Aboriginal and literary circles.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Legal Studies, SOSE/HSIE, Civics & Citizenship and History.

The program is classified PG (parental guidance recommended) with the consumer advice: Adult themes.

## WRITING

### Biography

Ruby Langford Ginibi is author of five books and a number of short stories, all of which recount her life experiences. Her first novel, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), is, according to the preface, 'a true life story of an Aboriginal woman's struggle to raise a family of nine children in a society divided between black and white culture in Australia'.

A biography is a non-fiction work that covers a person's life, or some aspect of their life, often to show how they have overcome adversity or achieved success. Biographies are written about a whole variety of people, though most notably about public and historical figures—for example, celebrities, authors, sports people, politicians, artists and entrepreneurs. Biographies are read for many different reasons; they provide an intimate and private insight into otherwise public people, and may reveal how a person overcame adversity or built their success and what motivated them.

Biographical works have a number of distinct conventions, the most important of which is truth—claims made in the text need to be researched and sourced. Biographies also conventionally follow a linear narrative structure, starting with the person's family, birth and childhood, and ending at their retirement or death. Often there is also a focus on a person's childhood and psychological make-up in explaining their story.

Biographies need not necessarily relate to real-life events. Virginia Woolf, for example, defied convention with her novel *Orlando* (1928). A parody of the biographical novel, *Orlando* traces the life of its eponymous fictional character, who lives through several ages and across both genders. In most other respects, however, Woolf kept loyal to the conventions of biographical writing.

Many people write a type of biography on a regular basis through keeping a personal diary or journal—this is autobiography, a biography written by the person who is also the subject. An obvious convention here is the use of first person to recount events.

While biography and autobiography belong to the realm of non-fiction and realism, they still remain subjective and creative works. The storyteller, or narrator, tells the story with his or her own perspective and motivations. Autobiography, while more intimate, can often be more subjective as the author has greater investment in being perceived in a particular light. This is not to discredit the value of biography—on the contrary, the narrator becomes an additional 'character' in the story.

- Where did Ruby get the inspiration to write?
- How does she describe the experience of writing her first novel?
- Ruby wrote a biography of her son, Nobby. What things would a biographer have to consider when writing a biography of someone still living?
- The interview is a form of biography. Identify and discuss some of the elements of the interview that make it biographical.
- Describe the way Ruby tells her stories in the interview. How important is 'voice' in writing?
- When you pick up a biography or autobiography, what do you expect to find in it? What are some conventions of this genre of writing?
- Why might someone write an autobiography?
- Have you read a biography? What interested you in choosing to read it?

### Activities

1. Beginnings. Choose three biographical works, including at least one autobiography, and read the first chapter of each. Compare and contrast how each biography introduces the subject and launches into the story.
2. Creative writing. A standard convention for biography is to begin with the subject's birth and childhood. Explore other ways of beginning a biographical piece and grasping the reader's attention by writing the opening chapter of your autobiography.
3. Identifying genre. Find an example of biography in writing, film, visual art, music and poetry.

### Indigenous Australian literature

In a 1994 interview, Langford Ginibi said: "I'm not interested in fiction. Don't need to be, because I'm too busy writing the truth about my people...This is from our side of the fence...Although the history of the whole of white Australia is one of the biggest fictions, aye?"<sup>1</sup>

Ruby Langford Ginibi is one of Australia's leading Aboriginal women authors, along with Sally Morgan (*My Place*), Doris Pilkington Garimara (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*) and Elsie (Labumore) Roughsey (*An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New*). The first published book by an Aboriginal woman came in 1964—Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *We are Going*, a collection of verse. Since then, there has been a steady stream of writing by Aboriginal women—a voice hitherto unheard, but now telling of past experiences, alienation and adversity, and how these were overcome.

While these narratives are often personal life histories, they transcend the individual's experience to tell the experience of Aboriginal communities. They provide Aboriginal and female perspectives on Aboriginal experiences and culture. These narratives have also been important for healing the divides in the author and community at large. In this sense, the act of writing becomes a form of political consciousness and resistance.

Aboriginal Australians have a very long and rich history of storytelling, mostly oral and pictorial. Authors such as Sally Morgan and Ruby Langford Ginibi adopt a western mode of storytelling to speak to a non-Indigenous audience, while infusing it with traditional Aboriginal narrative styles<sup>2</sup>. For example, in Ruby's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, the language is conversational and colloquial, and the structure is less linear and more fluid (often moving loosely between memories).

The growth of Indigenous Australian literature is mirrored in other places around the world where indigenous writing has developed, and is often referred to as postcolonial. They share similar features, including a focus on life history, fusing different storytelling techniques and challenging dominant representations of their cultures.

- What other books has Ruby written? What are they about?
- Why might it be important for stories such as hers and her son's to be told?
- How might having a non-Indigenous audience influence her writing?
- What role does Aboriginal writing play in reconciliation?
- As an example of writing by Aboriginal women, what might set her work apart from the writing of Aboriginal men?
- Identify some other Aboriginal writers, both male and female.

### Activities

4. Book review. Write a review of a book by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander woman writer. Identify how the style of storytelling takes shape in the book.
5. Comparison. Choose a biographical work from an indigenous author from another country. Write a review and report on the differences and similarities between the experiences mentioned in the book to those discussed in the program by Ruby.

### INDIGENOUS SOCIAL ISSUES

In the interview, as in her novels, Ruby discusses her experiences as an Aboriginal (and an Aboriginal woman) in Australia. Born in 1934, she lived through what were some of the hardest times for Aboriginal Australians.

This section provides some background to the Aboriginal experience in a non-Aboriginal Australia, and discusses some of the key social issues Ruby raises in the interview.

### Background

Ruby's childhood differed from that of many Aboriginal Australians at the time—she grew up with both parents (albeit her mother left at a young age and father was away working) and a familial network. Many Aboriginal children were separated from their families (either with parental consent or by force) as part of government policy across the country.

The first removals took place during the early period of settlement. Indigenous children were separated from their families for use as cheap labour on farms and inland stations. Some were also used as domestics.

By the early 1900s, each Australian state and territory had Aboriginal protection laws in place—the first formal government policy authorising the separations. The laws sought to protect Indigenous people from the effects of colonisation and settlement, and did so through two main strategies: segregation (by creating reserves to which Indigenous communities were relocated) and education of the young.

'Protectors' were appointed and given significant control over the lives of Indigenous people—this was especially true for their children, all of whom were placed under the protector's legal guardianship. This sweeping change of guardianship took place without consultation with Indigenous parents or communities.

Full-descent Indigenous populations gradually declined, while mixed-descent populations increased. Policies came to focus more on merging (assimilating) this mixed-descent population into the non-Indigenous community. Indigenous young people were sent to schools that would prepare them for absorption into non-Indigenous society as adults, while the younger children were usually sent to missions. Conditions in these institutions could be harsh and the occupants often lacked adequate food, basic facilities and medical treatment. Many schools also prohibited customary Indigenous practices and languages.

In the 1940s, a uniform set of child welfare laws was introduced and applied to Indigenous and non-Indigenous children alike. Children could only be removed if they were found to be 'neglected', 'destitute' or 'uncontrollable'. Despite their equal application, the laws did little to reduce the number of Indigenous children removed. Non-Indigenous standards of 'neglect' were applied, so that 'poverty' was considered neglect. Also, by then, neglect and destitution were features of many Indigenous peoples' lives precisely because of a history of dispossession and dislocation.

In 1967, Indigenous people 18 years and over were granted the right to vote in national elections. Indigenous protest and lobbying developed a stronger and more politically potent agenda. Among other things, they called for land rights, cultural heritage rights and recognition of the disadvantage experienced from colonisation (including the separation of children from their families). From the 1970s, governments gradually moved away from promoting assimilation and towards policies of self-determination and participation.

In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted a formal, independent inquiry—the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. The resulting report details the extent of the separations, as well as the effects on individuals, families and communities.

Aboriginal writer, Doris Pilkington Garimara, wrote a vivid account of the experience of the 'Stolen Generations' in her novel *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, which was subsequently made into a feature film.

- Ruby was born on Australia Day, which she says Indigenous people call 'Shame Day'. Why do you think they call it this?
- When she returned to the place of her people, the Bundjalung, what did she find?
- How would you describe Ruby's attitude to her experiences? What role did humour play?
- Ruby has described her experience as 'living between two cultures'. What would it be like to be assimilated into a more dominant culture?
- Consider how Aboriginal people, both today and in the past, living in rural and urban areas, might have different experiences.

### Activity

6. Research. Write a report or construct a timeline tracking the history of an aspect of Indigenous experience since colonisation in your state or territory. Review these as a class.

### Families

Ruby says that a great source of her pride and happiness comes from having her children around her. She raised nine children as a single mother without support from the children's fathers and in poor and insubstantial living conditions. She speaks candidly of her experiences with men and the prejudice she felt was directed to her as a single mother.

As a child, she had a fairly disconnected family life. Her mother left when she was just six-years-old and her father had to work in other towns and the country to provide for his children. She grew up with family friends in different towns on the north coast of New South Wales.

One of the key findings of HREOC's inquiry was that the history of separations had an adverse impact on Indigenous families in the long term. By being uprooted from their families, children were unable to develop sufficient parenting and carer skills that they could use in their own families. They were denied the basic experience of parenting. Experts testifying at the inquiry said that this was one of the most significant of all legacies of the separation policies.

- How old was Ruby when she had her first child?
- Give examples of some difficulties she encountered in her relationships with men and raising her children.
- How does Ruby describe her relationship with her mother? Discuss the importance of relationships with parents in developing our ability to form relationships as adults.
- Imagine being separated from your parents and family and moved to another region. How do you think this might affect your skills later in life as a parent?

### Criminal justice

In the program, Ruby says: "We're not quite two per cent of the total population of Australia, yet we're the most incarcerated people in Her Majesty's gaols in this country." Ruby wrote a book about her son Nobby, who was wrongfully convicted of firing at police and attempted murder at the age of 17.

At 30 June 2006, there were 6901 Indigenous prisoners in Australia, representing 24 per cent of the total prisoner population.<sup>3</sup> Based on these same figures, Indigenous Australians are 13 times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Indigenous Australians.

- How does Ruby describe the criminal justice system in Australia?
- What factors might account for a higher proportion of Aboriginal people in prison?

### Alcoholism

In the interview, Ruby is frank about her alcoholism, and mentions how alcohol and drug use has been a health problem in Aboriginal communities.

She took to drinking following the loss of three children—one in a fatal car accident, another in a fatal epileptic seizure and the third from a drug overdose. Ruby explains that she used alcohol to ‘drown her sorrows’. She eventually gave up ‘booze’ when her daughters showed her how alcohol was leading her to abusive behaviour and isolating her from her family.

Alcohol and substance abuse has had a devastating impact within Aboriginal communities, particularly in rural and remote areas. Aside from physical health issues associated with drugs, there is also a significant social dimension—family violence, crime and unemployment.

- Why did Ruby take up drinking? How did it impact on her life and parenting?
- Consider why alcohol and substance abuse might be so prevalent in Aboriginal communities.
- What are some of the side-effects, both physical and social, of alcohol consumption?

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Carole Ferrier, ‘Ruby Langford Ginibi and the Practice of Auto/biography’

<sup>2</sup> Carole Ferrier, ‘Aboriginal Women’s Narratives’ in *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women’s Novels*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992, 2nd edn, pp 204-05

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Prisoners in Australia*, 2007; [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)

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Leah Purcell (director), *Black Chicks Talking* [videorecording], Film Australia, Sydney, 2002

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# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY: RUBY LANGFORD GINIBI

A Film Australia National Interest Program

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Executive Producer: Sharon Connolly

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