May O'Brien , Susan Wyatt

The Legend of the Seven Sisters: A Traditional Aboriginal Story from Western Australia

Australia (1990)

TAGS: Creation Myths Indigenous Myths Pleiades

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General information	
Title of the work	The Legend of the Seven Sisters: A Traditional Aboriginal Story from Western Australia
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Country/countries of popularity	Australia
Original Language	English and Wangkatha/Wongatha/Wangathaa
First Edition Date	1990
First Edition Details	May O'Brien, *The Legend of the Seven Sisters: A Traditional Aboriginal Story from Western Australia*, ill. Sue Wyatt. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1990, 21 pp.
ISBN	9780855756994
Genre	Legends, Myths
Target Audience	Children
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Creators

May O'Brien , 1933 - 2020
(Author)

May Lorna O' Brien was descended from the Wongutha people of the Eastern Goldfields of Western Australia. May was born to an Aboriginal mother and a non-Aboriginal father on Wongatha/Maduwongga traditional land, on Edjudina sheep and cattle station. In her early life on the station she often had to hide from government officials when they came to remove Aboriginal children from their families. At the age of six she was taken with her sister to the Mount Margaret Mission in West Australia. May describes the Mount Margaret Mission as a "a good place", where she felt safe, and protected from being removed to the dreaded Moore River Settlement in W.A. to where children were taken away and never seen again. Taught by missionaries, May found learning was exciting, despite her sadness that her parents rarely visited their daughters. From an early age she aspired to be a teacher. May was sponsored by the Methodist Church in Kalgoorlie to attend Perth High School and went on to become the first Aboriginal woman in West Australia to earn a tertiary qualification and W.A.'s first Aboriginal teacher. She was a teacher for twenty five years, after which she worked for the Aboriginal Education Branch.

May L. O'Brien is recognised as an ambassador for Indigenous learning, having instigated the establishment of Aboriginal committees on education throughout W.A. She was awarded a British Empire Medal for her inspiring work as an educator. She is also known as an author of the Badudu series of children's books and the Bawoo series of traditional teaching stories in bi-lingual text. *The Legend of the Seven Sisters* is dedicated "to the children of the original descendants of the Wongutha people who came from over the Eastern Goldfields to live at Mount Margaret Mission in Western Australia".

Source:

Wynne, Emma, *The Early life of May O'Brien*, Radio Interview

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recorded by Bill Bunbury, 2006, ABC Local Radio (accessed: July 12, 2022).

Bio prepared by Margaret Bromley, University of New England, brom_ken@bigpond.net.au

Susan Wyatt , b. 1952
(Illustrator)

Susan Wyatt is a Wongai woman, born in Kalgoorlie, a Goldfields town in Western Australia. Educated at the Goldfields, she studied graphic design at James Street Art School in Perth. In 2003 Susan Wyatt was an Archibald Prize finalist for her portrait of Doris Pilkington, (Mugi Gamarra), author of *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*, which tells the story of Pilkington's mother, Molly Craig and two other Aboriginal girls who were forcibly removed from their families to be trained as servants at the Moore River Native Settlement, and their epic 1500 mile journey home on foot, by following the rabbit-proof fence in 1931. Sue Wyatt has illustrated five children's books with May L.O'Brien. Her dark, sketchy, dreamlike illustrations for *The Legend of The Seven Sisters* are executed in purple, orange and black wash with black ink drawings.

Bio prepared by Margaret Bromley, University of New England, brom_ken@bigpond.net.au

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Additional information

Summary

In her story of the Seven Sisters legend, May O'Brien dedicates this traditional Aboriginal story to the descendants of the Wongutha people who came to live at Mount Margaret Mission in Western Australia. Beginning with "Long, Long ago when only Aboriginal people lived in Australia" there were "small men...Yayarrs" who walked all over the country. These small men would leave Earth and travel up and down the Milky Way, coming back to Earth and landing on a special plateau where they would watch and listen to the activities of Aboriginal people (p. 3)*.

When the Seven Sisters decided to visit the Earth they found it was crowded with Yaryarr men. These "little men" would not move out of the way, so the distressed sisters found another hill: Yabu Yulangu, "the hill on which they cried" (p. 7). The Yaryarr men set out to pursue the women for their wives, but the sisters cleverly evaded them and all but one Yayarr man gave up the pursuit. One Sister, feeling hot and thirsty, separated from her Sisters and went looking for water.

Finding water in arid desert lands is tricky. The Sister had to cross a claypan "a natural hollow filled with clay and silt and it has a hard, flat, sun-baked surface" (p. 13). The Yayarr man is small but fast. He catches up with her and becomes violent, throwing sticks and stones at her, but he misses every time. The sticks and stones make marks in the landscape, which explains the topography of the desert landscape in Wongutha Country.

Finally the Sister breaks free and runs towards the hill where the Seven Sisters had landed on Earth. Alas, she is too late, as her Sisters had already returned to the sky. Distraught, she calls out in language " 'Ngayu yungarra. Ngayu ngananya balalgu'** (I'm alone. What will I do?)" and she cries for a long time before returning to the sky to be with her Sisters (p. 17).

The note in the margin tells us that six of the Sisters are clearly visible in the sky and the seventh Sister "can be seen faintly in the background as she trails behind" (p. 17).

* Quotation pages refer to the 2014 edition.

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** Wongatha language is translated in the glossary at the end of the book, and used naturalistically at dramatic moments in the story.

Analysis

Throughout the narrative, landforms, as well as important Aboriginal communities and geographical features are referenced in the margin of the page, so the reader can find them on a map, or recognise the landforms when they visit the site of the story. This story communicates a real sense of the landscape and the need to read it closely for your own safety and survival. Knowing exactly where to reliably find water at particular times of the year, as indicated by the stars visible in the sky, is very important Indigenous Knowledge. For women and girls, it is important to keep close together when travelling across Country, and understand the inappropriate behaviour of a predatory male, whilst respecting the law of not engaging with a male of the wrong skin. The Seven Sisters legend is a reminder of the consequences of transgressive behaviour regarding male female relationships in traditional Aboriginal communities. This Knowledge of Country and Law is rendered very accessible to young readers in May O'Brien's story, for whom it offers an introduction to Aboriginal astronomy.

The star cluster of Pleiades in the night sky is visible and significant to cultures in both north and south hemispheres. In the northern hemisphere skies it is associated with the coming winter season. It is best seen in the summer in the southern latitudes. The constellation is often imagined as a group of seven sisters, wherein the faintest star in the constellation often represents the youngest or the oldest sister. Stories of the Seven Sisters often metaphorically depict transgressive romantic or sexual relationships of the youngest sister being abducted or seduced and or betraying the family Law by her attraction to a predatory male character. In May O'Brien's story the Sister puts herself in danger by leaving the group to look for water. The story resonates of May O'Brien's own childhood experience, of "beginning to realise a sense of fear of white men" who targeted part Aboriginal children in particular for removal from their families.*

In Greek mythology the stars of Pleiades represent seven sisters, the daughters of Pleione and Atlas. Meriope took a mortal man and her star is the dimmest of the seven. Meriope's sisters bore children to Zeus, Poseidon, Hermes and Ares. Zeus turned them into stars to escape the predatory intentions of Orion the hunter. But he too

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became a constellation and continues to pursue them across the night sky.**

The Nez Percé myth of North America parallels the ancient Greek myth. In this psychologically more complex myth one of the star sisters falls in love with a mortal, who dies, leaving her in deep grief. She confides her feelings to her sisters who deride her for her sadness for the death of any human. Eventually her sadness and misery drive her to pull the sky over her face, blocking herself from obvious view, which explains why there are only six of the seven sisters visible in the night sky. The angry father banishes his own children to another part of the sky (Wikipedia). Wyandot people also tell of transgressive friendships between Wyandot people and human children.***

The songlines of Language groups regarding the origins of the Pleiades story for Australian Aboriginal peoples are often referred to as the Seven Sisters. Songlines explain how the land was formed. The Seven Sisters Songline is a significant creation story of Aboriginal Australia. In the Aboriginal world view a songline defines a group of people, the land that they live on and the law that they live under. They define ceremonies and obligations to Country and sacred sites located on their Country.

Songlines are related to Dreamings. They connect sacred sites and important features of the land. They explain how the land was formed. Creation stories or Dreaming stories are told at different levels, accessible to different people, teachings or reminding people of the consequences of making a terrible mistake. Indigenous scholar Margot Neale affirms that “Songlines, related to Dreamings or Dreaming tracks, connect sites of knowledge embodied in features of the land”.****

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* Wynne, Emma, *The Early life of May O’Brien*, Radio Interview recorded by Bill Bunbury, 2006, ABC Local Radio (accessed: July 12, 2022).

** Cotterell, Arthur and Rachel Storm, *The Ultimate Encyclopaedia Mythology: An A-Z guide to the myths and legends of the ancient world*, Hong Kong: Hermes House, 1999, 75.

*** "Pleiades in folklore and literature", Wikipedia (accessed: July 12,

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	2022). **** Neale, Margot and Lynne Kelly, *First Knowledges, Songlines*, Port Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 2020, 1.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Creation Myths Indigenous Myths Pleiades
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Desires Family Innocence Journeys Knowledge Relationships Tradition Transformation
Further Reading	Caruana, Wally, *Aboriginal Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2012. Cotterell, Arthur and Rachel Storm, *The Ultimate Encyclopaedia Mythology: an A-Z guide to the myths and legends of the ancient world*, Hong Kong: Hermes House, 1999. McCulloch, Susan and Emily McCulloch Childs, *McCulloch's Contemporary Aboriginal Art: the complete guide*, Fitzroy, Victoria: McCulloch & McCulloch Australian Art Books, 2001. Neale, Margot, ed., *Songlines: tracking the Seven Sisters*, Canberra, ACT: National Museum of Australia Press, 2017. Neale, Margot and Lynne Kelly, *First Knowledges, Songlines*, Port Melbourne, Victoria: Thames and Hudson, 2020. Sultan, Reggie, *An Uncontrollable Child; the autobiography of an Aboriginal artist*, Coolalinga, Northern Territory: David Welch Publications, 2008.

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