

# Building a practice of truth-telling in English classrooms

Melitta Hogarth, Jessica Gannaway, Sara Tajima, Emma Ross, Troy Potter, Helen Cozmescu, and Sarah Truman, The University of Melbourne

**Ngarrngga is a Taungurung word meaning to know, to hear, to understand. Informed by a design-based research methodology, Ngarrngga strives to support educators to be confident in showcasing Indigenous Knowledge within their teaching and learning to provide opportunity for all Australian students to learn about the contributions and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to Australian society through a practical and sustained approach.**

The Yoorrook Justice Commission, Australia's first Indigenous-led truth-telling process, has made it unmistakably clear: the legacy of colonial violence is not history – it is ongoing. This work is not a one-off event. To be meaningful, truth-telling must live in the daily practices of our classrooms, shaping how students understand this country, their place within it, and their responsibility to its future.

Ngarrngga works closely with educators and schools navigating the complexities of respectfully embedding Indigenous knowledges across the curriculum. Time and again, we are struck by the deep goodwill, ethical commitment, and desire among teachers to engage meaningfully in this work. The emotional weight of teaching difficult knowledges is significant, the discomforts are real, but it is imperative that all educators take up this work. There is no longer a question about the necessity of truth-telling in educational contexts – that case has been made.

The critical question at this intersection pertains to how we go about this work. How do we enact truth-telling in ways that centre Indigenous voices, and introduce difficult knowledges with consideration to student age and readiness? How might we work across the full spectrum of learning areas and year levels to ensure that this work is sustained meaningfully across a student's learning? These are the pedagogical and relational queries that shape our current moment.

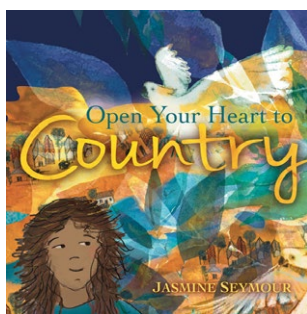
With these questions in mind, we engaged colleagues across Ngarrngga and the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne to hear from a range of non-Indigenous educators and Language and Literacy experts: Sara Tajima (Early Childhood), Helen Cozmescu (Primary Early Years literacy), Emma Ross (Primary Educator and Curriculum Writer) Troy Potter (Secondary English), and literary researcher Sarah Truman. Our aim was to understand how they approach truth-telling across different stages of schooling, and which texts they find most supportive in doing this work.

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## Early years and early primary: A rich corpus of Indigenous- authored picture books

**Sara:** Picture books are invaluable pedagogical tools for introducing the complex concept of truth-telling to young children in early learning environments. The captivating narratives and vivid illustrations inherent in these literary works resonate profoundly with the developmental stage of young learners. Notably, the growing corpus of picture books authored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers has been purposefully crafted to facilitate the introduction of truth-telling to our youngest learners.

While grappling with intricate topics such as truth-telling necessitates careful preparation and reflection on the part of educators, early childhood professionals excel in rendering complex concepts accessible through the judicious adaptation of language, selection of thought-provoking questions, and a nuanced understanding of their learners' diverse backgrounds. Educators can thoughtfully curate and extract pertinent sections from these resources, ensuring that the introduction of challenging material is developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive.



The versatility of picture books transcends explicit truth-telling narratives. Educators can leverage contextual elements or storylines to facilitate discussions about historical injustices and wrongdoings, fostering empathy and understanding among young learners. For instance, phrases from Jasmine Seymour's (2022) seminal work, *Open Your Heart to Country*, can serve as entry points to explore the Stolen Generations and connect them to relatable experiences of displacement and belonging for young children.

Through skilful facilitation of discussions centred around these narratives, educators can deepen children's comprehension of the broader societal and cultural landscapes, enabling them to forge connections between the stories and the real-world implications of truth-telling, historical reckoning, and the pursuit of justice.

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While the integration of these books can occur throughout the academic year, their impact can be particularly profound when strategically aligned with significant dates and weeks related to Indigenous cultures. Picture books exhibit remarkable flexibility, enabling educators to employ them in a myriad of ways to cater to the diverse needs and learning styles of their young audiences. They can present the complete narrative, extract specific sections for in-depth exploration, or even concentrate on a single page of illustrations, embracing multimodal literacies. This adaptability empowers educators to tailor the experience, ensuring it resonates profoundly with their learners through a range of formats, from intimate one-on-one interactions to dynamic whole-group activities.

**Helen:** To address the question of what to teach about First Nations histories, teachers must first consider a broader, more fundamental question: What do all Australians need to know? Reflection on this critical question should uncover substantive topics such as violence and dispossession, cultural suppression, colonisation, sovereignty, and reconciliation. While these topics may initially seem beyond the cognitive and emotional capacity of young children, even the most complex issues can be approached through the lens of children's lived experiences. For instance, concepts of fairness can introduce ideas about dispossession, while discussions about family and community can lay the groundwork for understanding cultural importance.

Exploring different languages used by the students and positioning these as part of the students' identities can serve as a bridge to discuss the suppression of Aboriginal languages. Making decisions about how the classroom space or playground is used can lead to discussions about self-determination and respect that relate to sovereignty.

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Australian documents, such as the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, see young children as competent learners who can make choices and contribute to the world. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to assume that young students can engage with topics of substance when presented in sensitive and scaffolded ways that help to build a foundation for the ongoing process of truth-telling.

The English Curriculum, with its strong focus on the narrative, offers a starting point for truth-telling in the early years classroom. Narratives are important resources when engaging early years students (Pesco & Gagné, 2017), who are learning how to identify story elements, generate oral narratives of personal experiences and others, and for whom narratives can promote higher-order thinking (Hall et al., 2021).

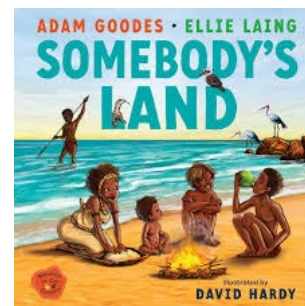
In recent years, narratives written by First Nations authors and suitable for young students have become popular additions to classroom libraries. These texts can be made central to the English Curriculum and are necessary when addressing curriculum content relating to texts created by First Nations authors and illustrators. For example, in relation to texts created by First Nations authors, students in the Foundation year of Victorian primary schools are asked to compare their experiences to those portrayed in literary texts. In Year 1, students are asked to discuss how language and images are used to create characters and settings, and by Year 2, students examine how characters and settings are connected.

Engaging with texts written by First Nations authors provides one way of ensuring the prioritisation of First Nations voices. Respected Kamilaroi and Euahlayi author Gregg Dreise advises teachers to share the author's language group and Country when reading narratives with children (Dreise, 2022). This is an easy lesson inclusion that acknowledges diversity, promotes respect, connects literature to Country, and creates the foundations for deeper learning about First Nation histories, cultures, and contemporary issues as students progress through their education.

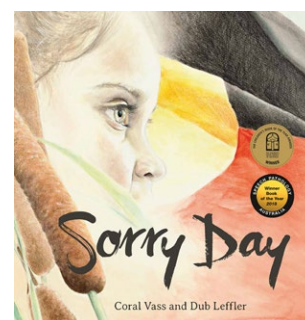
### Key texts in the early years



*Two Mates*, written by descendants of the Ngarluma People of the Pilbara, Melanie and Maggie Prewett, is the story of two friends. This narrative presents a nuanced, positive representation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships and daily life. It offers a starting point for discussions about cultural diversity, shared experiences, and the ongoing presence and importance of Indigenous cultures in contemporary Australia. Teachers can use this story to begin conversations about respect for different cultures, the significance of Country to First Nations Peoples, and the value of traditional knowledge and practices.



*Somebody's land* by Adnyamathanha and Narungga community leader Adam Goodes, journalist Ellie Laing, and Barkindji illustrator David Hardy, introduces the concept of colonisation, using language accessible to young students. The repeated sentences 'They said it was nobody's land. But it was somebody's land', contradict the concept of Terra Nullius. By affirming First Nations' presence and ownership, the narrative promotes respect for Indigenous histories and rights. Teachers can use this story to open discussions about respect, truth, and the importance of acknowledging First Nations perspectives in Australian history.



The Stolen Generations can be introduced to young children with the picture book *Sorry Day* by Coral Vass and Bigambul and Mandandanji illustrator Dub Leffler. This text moves from contemporary times to events in the past and back to contemporary times, ending with Kevin Rudd's speech to the Nation, in 2008. The illustrations in this text encourage

young students to empathise. Images of faces, both from the past and from today, signal the ongoing legacy of the Stolen Generations. The importance of apology is highlighted, and the use of Rudd's speech helps young students understand the government's involvement in past actions and in present efforts towards reconciliation.

Further recommendations include *For 60,000 Years* by Marlee Silva and Rhys Paddick, and *The Land Recalls You* by Kirli Saunders and illustrated by Bundjalung artists David and Noni Cragg.

### Preparing for engagement with difficult stories

Young students' everyday experiences provide them with the opportunity to connect ideas encountered in class with their own lives. They may revisit content, ideas and questions with family, either directly or in their play. Therefore, transparent and upfront communication with families is essential. Practices that schools have found effective include the provision of termly or weekly overviews, explaining the intent of teaching First Nations histories, including the importance of truth-telling, reconciliation, and alignment with curriculum goals; family access to texts used in class and reassurance that, where possible, class resources that include First Nations voices have been sourced; and ongoing communication about children's progress and work samples via the regular forums teachers use to communicate with families.

Families need to feel confident that their children's wellbeing and safety are not compromised. Communication about classroom norms regarding respect, listening, empathy, and open discussion should be provided. Families should also be made aware of the measures the school has in place for emotional support, not only for students but also for families (for example, access to a school counsellor or a First Nations education officer). Most importantly, the avenues for open dialogue between families and school are needed, particularly if families feel that the content covered is contentious. Open dialogue between schools and families will allow schools to hear parental concerns and provide the opportunity to remind families that teaching histories is mandated by the curriculum and is part of Australia's commitment to truth-telling and respectful citizenship.

### Primary years: Multi-modal engagement with truth-telling

**Emma:** Truth-telling within the primary school English curriculum presents significant pedagogical opportunities to foster cultural understanding, critical thinking, and ethical engagement. By embedding First Nations perspectives through literature, oral narratives, and classroom discussions, educators can introduce students to diverse worldviews and lived experiences that are often excluded from mainstream discourse. When young learners engage with authentic texts, they begin to appreciate storytelling as a powerful vehicle for truth, identity, and justice.

Reading diverse and honest voices that offer truthful representations of culture, history, and identity demonstrates how literature can uncover hidden or marginalised stories. This aligns closely with critical literacy practices, which

encourage students to question texts by asking: Who is telling the story? What is being left out? Whose truth is being centred? Such approaches foster the ability to recognise bias, omission, and the multiplicity of perspectives.

A focus on critical thinking and the consideration of the voices behind stories extends to Justine Grogan's reflections on the [Truth-telling Pedagogies and Education Panel\\*](#), where she highlighted the exclusion of Indigenous voices from commonly visited excursion sites such as the Australian War Memorial and various historical museums. Visiting these places offers educators the opportunity to cultivate critical thinking by guiding students to question whose story is being told and whose is being excluded – an important step toward fostering a more holistic understanding of history and nurturing empathetic, informed, and socially conscious learners.

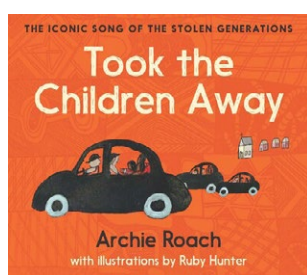


## Key texts in the primary years

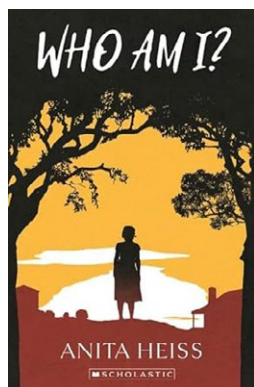
### Stolen Generations



Stolen Girl – Trina Saffioti and Norma MacDonald (middle and upper primary)



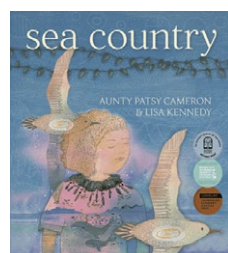
Took the Children Away – Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter (middle primary)



Who Am I? – Anita Heiss (historical fiction narrative suitable for whole class read-aloud or novel study in upper primary)

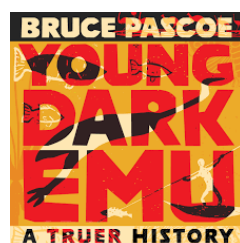
Facilitating a discussion on Stolen Generations using prompting questions such as ‘When did this happen?’ and ‘Who was affected?’, supports student understanding of the texts. It is important to encourage students to consider the emotional and social impact on both the children who were removed from their families and the parents who experienced this loss.

### Colonialism, land rights and connection to Country



Sea Country – Aunty Patsy Cameron

This is a great book for junior primary students. The illustrations are beautiful and it shares Indigenous peoples’ connection to Country through a deep knowledge of the land, food harvesting and animals.



Young Dark Emu – Bruce Pascoe

A great introduction to colonialism and land rights.

Helen and Sara’s earlier recommendations are also appropriate for primary students:

Open Your Heart to Country – Jasmine Seymour

Day Break – Amy McQuire and Matt Chun (good to read around January 26)

Somebody’s Land – Adam Goodes and Ellie Laing

Exploring songs that address themes of truth-telling, protest, and reconciliation with Years 5 and 6 students can be a powerful learning experience. The incorporation of music supports a deeper emotional and conceptual understanding of more complex themes.

‘Took the Children Away’ – Archie Roach

‘Treaty’ – Yothu Yindi

‘The Children Came Back’ – Briggs ft. Gurrumul and Dewayne Everettsmith

‘Walanbaa’ – Mitch Tambo (a song about celebrating the strength of men and women on Country)

‘Blue Gums Calling Me Back Home’ – Roger Knox (better for early primary years, supports an understanding of connection to Country).

While written texts are an accessible starting point, it is equally important to incorporate oral traditions and art forms that transmit truthful knowledge, thereby validating cultural epistemologies and ways of knowing beyond Western literacy norms.

As teachers and teacher educators, we contribute to healing when we make room for truth in our classrooms. Truth-telling asks teachers to engage with stories that unsettle dominant narratives – stories that are often emotionally charged, historically silenced, and politically fraught.

### Beyond reading: Truth-telling through writing

Connecting learning to young children's personal experiences is essential in primary school, as it fosters deeper engagement and understanding. Encouraging students to write narratives or personal reflections allows them to explore their own truths and teaches the value of honesty and authenticity. Prompts such as 'Write about a time you felt misunderstood/ proud/challenged' or 'Create a story about a character who stands up for the truth or exposes a lie' provide meaningful entry points into these themes. Learning experiences like this link storytelling with concepts of ethics and courage, offering an age-appropriate foundation for exploring First Nations truth-telling within the primary school context.

**Over in the secondary years, Troy agrees:** I think more research and thinking needs to take place in relation to the role of writing to support truth-telling. What comes to mind when we think about truth-telling is that the recipients need to read or listen to stories, and to understand that past and present. Of course this is true, but I think writing also provides an opportunity for students to reflect on and engage with truth-telling in more personal and creative ways. The writing process can be more agential than listening, and so supporting the listening or reading with writing has the potential to actively engage students in the truth-telling and truth-receiving process in productive or generative ways.

### Secondary years and beyond: considering lived experience and reading critically

**Sarah:** My subject area is English literary education. In this subject I see opportunities for truth-telling through stories – specifically fictional stories and poetry. Some of my research explores how fiction and poetry, and narrative and poetics contain truths that can be experienced through reading. When I consider the relationship between stories and the truth, I often think of a quotation by feminist scholar Donna Haraway which is: '... once we know we cannot not know:' reading and being affected by what we read can help us know truths, and there's a responsibility that comes with that knowledge. Australia has many Indigenous authors whose stories offer wonderful examples of the power literature for revealing truths.

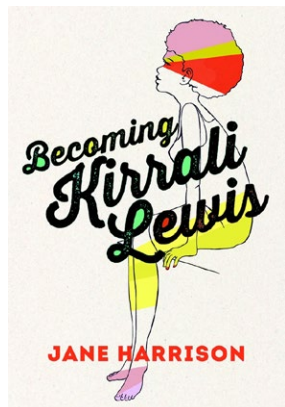
**Troy:** I see there being two main opportunities for secondary English teachers to engage with truth-telling. First, is through the inclusion of texts that engage with ideas not just about Australia's colonial past but also the ongoing disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience because we haven't allowed truth-telling to occur. In English, students could analyse arguments in relation to reconciliation, truth-telling, or other related issues. Not too long ago, the racism that Adam Goodes experienced on the football field rightfully made headlines – in both progressive and conservative publications – and having students read articles like these and reflect on the way in which arguments are being made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would support truth-telling in English.

A second opportunity is for students to study literary works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors – for example, Tony Birch, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Melissa Lucashenko, Kim Scott, Ellen van Neerven. Reading these stories is a form of truth-telling – and teachers need to be supported to do this.

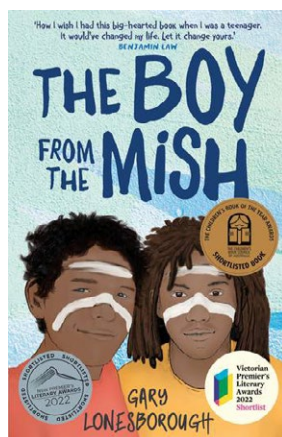
Literary works written by non-Indigenous authors that interrogate Australia's colonial condition offer another opportunity, although I think there are fewer authors writing in this space, largely because there is growing recognition about who can and should tell these stories. I'm here thinking of Gary Crew's *Strange Objects* or James Moloney's *The House on River Terrace*. Both of these interrogate Australia's colonial past through the lens of a white male protagonist but in many ways appropriate Indigenous knowledges and perpetuate discourses of whiteness. But then, including such texts is important as it can teach students how to read critically – which is the second way in which English can support truth-telling: that is, teaching young people to understand how creators of texts – not just literary texts, like novels and film, but all texts, including news articles and other spoken or digital texts – represent perspectives about human experiences and, in doing so, can expose particular ideologies or power relations and highlight how the texts we read can shape our real-world understandings.

## Key texts in the secondary years

There are many literary texts that secondary English teachers might use to support truth-telling in the English classroom, and I would direct teachers to Reading Australia's list of First Nations texts\*\*, all of which have (or soon will have) supporting teaching resources that have been produced by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander educators.



One text which my team and I have produced a sequence of lessons on\*\*\* is Jane Harrison's *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* (2015), which explores the cultural shifts that were happening in Australia in the 1960s and 1980s through the lens of an Aboriginal teenage girl who is forcibly removed from her family during the Stolen Generations.



Another text that might be used to explore truth-telling is Gary Lonesborough's *The Boy from the Mish* (2021) which explores the intersections of identity – Aboriginality, poverty, sexuality, rurality – as Jackson comes to accept his identity and the importance of self-belief. And, of course, there's the anthology, *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia* (2018) edited by Anita Heiss, which showcases the diverse voices, experiences and stories of Aboriginal writers.

Further recommendations include poetry such as *Dropbear* by Evelyn Araluen; short stories like those in *Heat and Light* by Ellen van Neerven; and the novel *Praiseworthy* by Alexis Wright.

### Continuing our learning: Further reading for educators

As educators engaged with truth-telling in our classrooms, it is crucial that we are engaged with ongoing learning to deepen our understanding of colonial harms and the racism inherent within their logics.

**Troy:** Any text that supports teachers to understand critical theories about race, or how subject English can centre Indigenous voices and truth-telling, is important.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson's writing about whiteness would be beneficial as this supports English educators to understand how language is used to erase Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. While twenty years old, her edited work, *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (2005), would be a key text to include in pre- or in-service English teacher subjects. While not written by Indigenous Australian researchers, the idea of whiteness in education is also examined in a more recent work by Arathi Sriprakash, Sophie Rudolph and Jessica Gerrard: *Learning Whiteness: Education and the Settler Colonial State* (2022). Lily Brown, Odette Kelada and Dianne Jones's 2021 article, "'While I knew I was raced, I didn't think much of it': The need for racial literacy in decolonising classrooms," would be another key text that also explores issues of whiteness and how this relates to racial literacies within the Australian context. Amy Thomson's 2024 article 'Proppa way: Literature as truth-telling and Indigenous futurity in subject English' provides further advice for educators seeking to engage in truth-telling through literature, as does Sandra Phillips, Larissa McLean Davies and Sarah E. Truman's 2022 article 'Power of country: Indigenous relationality and reading Indigenous climate fiction in Australia.'

### Truth-telling across all stages of schooling

The insights shared by contributors across early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary settings speak to both the promise and complexity of embedding truth-telling within English literacy and literature classrooms. While the texts and strategies offered are rich and diverse, what emerges most powerfully is the idea that truth-telling is not a one-off lesson, nor a checklist of particular texts or materials, but a sustained, relational process grounded in place, community, and care; drawing on teacher expertise and deep knowledge of our student cohorts.

As teachers and teacher-educators, we contribute to healing when we make room for truth in our classrooms.

Truth-telling asks teachers to engage with stories that unsettle dominant narratives – stories that are often emotionally charged, historically silenced, and politically fraught. Doing this work well requires reflection on one's own location, openness to learning with and from Indigenous communities, and the willingness to stay in the discomfort that truth-telling often brings. We can approach truth-telling as a practice and a way of being in the profession: to walk carefully and collectively, to engage critically and compassionately, and to begin – wherever we are – with the work of centring truth and voice in our classrooms. The stories we choose, the texts we elevate, and the conversations we facilitate can be part of a broader movement toward justice, recognition, reparation and respect.

*If you are interested in truth-telling as a practice, the Ngarrngga Truth-telling and Reparative Pedagogies lab brings together educators and researchers globally to build collective practice. Sign up for the Ngarrngga mailing list to be kept up to date with publications, panel discussions and support materials for this important work.* <https://www.ngarrngga.org/>

\*The Truth-telling Pedagogies Panel can be viewed at: <https://www.ngarrngga.org/stories-news/truth-telling-pedagogies-education-panel-recording>

\*\*Reading Australia. (n.d.). *First Nations texts*. Reading Australia. <https://readingaustralia.com.au/themes/first-nations-texts>

\*\*\*These resources will eventually be housed at <https://arc.educationapps.vic.gov.au/learning/sites/lesson-plans>



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**Emma Ross** is a Curriculum Writer for Ngarrngga and an award-winning educator with twelve years of experience in both urban primary schools and remote Aboriginal communities as a teacher, leader and consultant. Her research

focuses on innovative educational practices, with particular emphasis on fostering young children's creativity, collaboration and critical thinking skills.

**Sara Tajima** lives and works on Peek Whurrung and Kirrae Whurrung lands of the Eastern Maar/Gunditjmara nations. Sara works as a Research Fellow at Ngarrngga. She holds a Master of Social Sciences (International Development) from RMIT University, and a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Honours) from the University of Melbourne. Her research interests lie in social equity, intercultural education, and the early years.

**Troy Potter** is a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne, Australia. His interdisciplinary research explores critical and disciplinary literacies in the secondary school context. His other main areas of research include representations of gender and sexuality in literature for young people. He is the author of *Books for Boys: Manipulating Genre in Contemporary Australian Young Adult Fiction* (2018).

**Helen Cozmescu** teaches in Language and Literacies subjects at the University of Melbourne and coordinates the Master of Education course. She has extensive experience teaching and leading literacy in schools and continues to work with in-service teachers. Her PhD studies intersected critical literacies, young students, and First Nations perspectives. Helen recognises her responsibilities as a 'settler teacher' to listen to First Nations voices and support all students to do the same.

**Sarah E. Truman** is a white settler from Canada/UK living uninvited in Naarm. Truman is currently an ARC DECRA fellow researching speculative fiction, and co-director of the Literary Education Lab at University of Melbourne. [www.sarahetruan.com](http://www.sarahetruan.com)

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