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## Once Upon a Time



SCHEHERAZADE'S WEDDING NIGHT was fraught with a particular peril. Convinced that women were unfaithful after a betrayal by his first wife, her new husband, King Shahryar of Persia, had ensured the fidelity of each subsequent bride by executing them the day after the wedding, thereby guaranteeing that they would not stray.

Scheherazade escaped this fate with a very powerful weapon: the art of storytelling. On her wedding night, she enthralled her husband with a story. But she did not conclude the tale. Instead, she left him dangling in suspense as dawn broke. He spared her life because of his deep curiosity about what happened next.

The following evening Scheherazade continued her story. She wove her tale throughout the night and, as the sun once again rose, left her husband craving to know more. She did the same the next night, and the next, and the next. If a story ended, she would begin a new one before the night was over, and the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* are now testament to her time-honoured craft of storytelling.

At the end of those thousand and one nights, Shahryar had fallen in love with Scheherazade and she had borne him three sons. He had also grown wiser through the morals woven through her tales. Scheherazade's stories had not only saved her life but also made her husband a better man – and a better king. I like to think that she enjoyed life to a grand old age.

As a novelist, I am of course seduced by the idea that stories can be so powerful, can take such a hold over the listener and be transformative. But as an avid reader and as a regular visitor to the cinema and theatre, I know how true this is. Few pleasures in life feel more decadent than reading a book from cover to cover simply because you cannot put it down. Those books become like treasures – mine include *Blood* by Tony Birch, *Larry's Party* by Carol Shields, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, *True Pleasures: A Memoir of Women in Paris* by Lucinda Holdforth, and everything by Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Henry James and Charles Dickens. I can't imagine *not* having these books close by in my house; they feel like friends.

If further evidence is needed of the hold on our hearts that stories have, we might simply look at the way our favourite tales from childhood remain with us for the rest of our lives. I still have a copy of *Mog the Forgetful Cat*, as well as my copies of Enid Blyton's chronicles of the Famous Five and the Secret Seven. I didn't part with them when I grew up into the world of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. And I still couldn't part with them when

I moved into the worlds of Mr Rochester, Mr Darcy and Colonel Brandon.



This book is inspired by one story that captured my imagination. It is the tale of Eliza Fraser, a white woman who was shipwrecked on an island off the east coast of Australia in 1836, and who spent a period of several weeks with the local Aboriginal people of that land. Like most stories that have a powerful impact, it is a simple one. A classic ‘fish-out-of-water tale’, as they might call it in the movie business.

I came across Eliza’s story by a circuitous route. I had been aware of it in the vaguest of ways from sources I couldn’t recall, but it came to mind when I was living in the prairies of Canada after finishing graduate school in the United States. In a little bookshop in Saskatoon I came across a copy of Sarah Carter’s *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada’s Prairie West*. Fresh from my doctoral studies in law, I usually dived into the Cultural Studies section at the bookshop to find something that would spark my interest but often left empty-handed.

But *Capturing Women* turned out to be a treasure trove. It included accounts of white women who had been living with the Métis in Canada of their own free will but who had found themselves described in newspaper reporting at

the time as having been kidnapped. It had suited journalists and politicians to create an image of the Métis as savage and threatening. And getting the population excited and worried about the threat helped sell papers. (Not much has changed in the tactics of the newspaper world, it would seem.) But no amount of protestation from the women themselves altered the way that these stories were told in the popular press. Facts were troublesome when competing with a convenient and titillating fiction.

So I became curious to revisit the story of Eliza Fraser that I remembered as a comparable one of a white woman ‘captured by cannibals’. I was interested to see whether Eliza’s story fitted the model that Sarah Carter had identified. It turned out it didn’t. The tale of Eliza Fraser was far more nuanced and fascinating. She became both a charismatic and an elusive figure. As I traced her through the books that had been written about her, I found her to be more and more intriguing with the discovery of each new layer and interpretation of what had happened to her.

Eventually it was not just Eliza’s own story that would fascinate me. I became interested in the ways in which she had captured the imagination of so many others. She had been the subject of several fanciful accounts of her life and, in 1976, an even more fanciful film – *Eliza Fraser* was directed by Tim Burstall from a screenplay by David Williamson, and starred Susannah York as Eliza, Noel Ferrier as her husband and Australian icon Abigail as ‘Buxom Girl’. These interpretations tended to highlight the drama of the white woman among savages, as well as

the ‘boys’ own adventure’ aspect of her rescue.

Eliza’s story also inspired more thoughtful reflection, though no less romantic. Sidney Nolan had painted her – on all fours crawling through the sandy landscape – and he had managed to intrigue his then close friend Patrick White, who himself was inspired to write a novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*, based on Eliza’s experiences. White, unsurprisingly, took a more complicated view of Eliza. He played with her background, making the character she inspired – Ellen – a woman who was elevated from the working classes through her marriage instead of someone who had always enjoyed middle-class privilege. Like Nolan, White saw the drama in the struggle Eliza would have had against nature and conceived this as a metaphor for our own internalised struggles. Although White appeared to have a sympathetic view of Aboriginal people, he did not create them as well-rounded characters. They were included as a canvas against which to explore Ellen’s psychological journey.

And it was the role that Aboriginal people play in Eliza’s story that quickly became of central interest to me. The Butchulla people are the traditional custodians and owners of K’gari (pronounced ‘Gurri’), the place now known as Fraser Island. In the stories of Eliza’s time with them, they are – especially the men – part of the danger she faces. They are nameless. They are stereotyped negatively. They are barbaric. And they have been constructed in this way to make the story more interesting. Otherwise, the plot isn’t so gripping; the audience isn’t captivated.

But more was at stake in these diverse accounts than just ensuring a ripping yarn. Eliza's story was put to use well beyond anything she would have imagined. And here is the resonance with Scheherazade and her storytelling. Scheherazade told captivating tales but she did not tell them just for the pure pleasure they gave. Her agenda was to keep her husband intrigued enough that her life would be spared. Along the way she also used the messages and morals implicit in her stories to educate her husband and to shape his values. She succeeded, reminding us that often there is a motivation – a politics – that accompanies the telling of any story.

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Eliza's story is rich with motives, most of them not intended by her but by others. In fact, so many people have used her story, appropriated it for their own purposes, that in the end it is hard to see who she really is. I have concluded over the years that we hardly know Eliza at all. She is often as elusive as the Butchulla are in the pages that recount her experiences.



This book begins with how Eliza's story was told, by whom and why. Excerpts from various accounts of her tale recreate the tones and styles of the time. I then explore the themes that give this tale its dramatic tension and look at the motivations behind some versions of her story.

From the colonists' perspective I turn to that of the Butchulla, bringing them out of the shadows. They have their own reflections about Eliza's time with them and the legacy she left, and the contrast in perspectives reveals a complex and intriguing example of cross-cultural conflict.

Two themes of this story hold a particular fascination for me. I am naturally interested in the way that the Butchulla women are portrayed. The Aboriginal men might be constructed as a danger but the women are also given the role of villains, being jealous of Eliza because she is white and therefore assumed to be more attractive. The Aboriginal women are stereotyped negatively – as promiscuous, as bad mothers, as vindictive.

Then there is the fear of cannibals. In Eliza's tale, and other captivity narratives from the United States, Canada and the Pacific, it is assumed that the indigenous people of each area are cannibals. It's part of their inherent danger. Yet there is little evidence of cannibalism in any of those places. The Butchulla certainly weren't into the business of eating each other, so why were they presumed to be? And why did Europeans imagine cannibals to be in every new place they went?

It is easy to look at Eliza's story today and see how these negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people are

simplistic, racist and offensive. But a more stimulating and difficult question is raised by the use of positive stereotypes when representing Aboriginal people. If painting Aboriginal people as villains and their culture as barbaric is antiquated, isn't it the case that accounts of Aboriginal people in popular culture that employ positive stereotypes are automatically a good thing? Well, at the risk of sounding like I can never be happy – no, it's not. What harm, then, can be done by positive stereotypes?

Two instances in recent times provoke a response.

Elizabeth Durack was a well-established and respected artist in her own right when she invented the *nom de brush* of Eddie Burrup and attributed to him a new style of painting she developed. She invented not only the name but also a whole backstory of Eddie's life and worldview. Eddie was opposed to native title; he liked it better when the white people were in charge; he didn't trust half-castes. When Durack finally revealed that she was Eddie Burrup, she described the creation of this alter ego as an act of reconciliation and an essential part of her creative process. Looking at the choices she made about Eddie provides an interesting account of how a non-Aboriginal person sees an Aboriginal one.

Marlo Morgan spent thirty-one weeks on the United States bestseller list with her book *Mutant Message Down Under* after it was released by a commercial publisher in 1994. Morgan's account of her adventure in Australia, where she meets a lost tribe of Aboriginal people who give her a warning to take back to the rest of the world about



the dangers posed to the environment, was a sensation not only with the New Age market but also with the wider reading public. Her Aboriginal tribe were quintessential noble savages, untouched by European culture; so in tune with nature were these people, they were telepathic. When the veracity of Morgan's book was questioned, she became defensive, stuck to her story and maintained that the Aboriginal people from Australia who questioned her didn't believe her because they were not real Aboriginal people.

These stories do not occur in a vacuum; they meander into our value systems and our institutions. Every time I explore the concepts in Eliza Fraser's story, I seem to find my way back to the legal implications that have flowed from the various accounts. As I am a lawyer by training, it is perhaps no surprise that I am interested in the way in which elements of each of these stories all seem to make some link with the legal system. Eliza's story was used to show that Aboriginal people were savage and in need of saving by missionaries, and because they were seen as not sophisticated enough to have property laws the same way the Europeans did, their land was there for the taking. The Butchulla link Eliza's time with them directly to their own dispossession.

Thinking about Eliza's story often makes me consider the way that my own profession uses storytelling, particularly in relation to Aboriginal people. On reflection, it is not surprising that I find links between storytelling and law. Law is another form of storytelling. It talks of

precedent but it is also about competing narratives. Lawyers representing opposing sides in a case construct different stories of the facts to convince the judge or jury that their version is the correct one.

So this book is not just about Eliza's story; it is also about the other stories that I discovered and reconsidered in the wake of my fascination with her. Like all good stories, Eliza's shipwreck, her time with Aboriginal people and her eventual rescue raised more questions for me. Just like Shahryar waiting to hear Scheherazade's next twist, each time I think about one more permutation of the story, I want to know more.