

**Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* (UWA Publishing, 2016)**

In the introduction to *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, Stephen Muecke writes,

Presenting the stories as narrative art is a way of justifying a writing which tries to imitate the spoken word. When language is read as poetic, it is the form of the language itself, as well as its underlying content, which is important. Just as it would be unjustifiable to rewrite a poet's work into 'correct' English (in other words to take away the poet's 'license'), so it would be unjustifiable to rewrite the words of Paddy Roe's stories. (9)

Muecke's assertion that the 'form' of Paddy Roe's words matter, and furthermore that it would be 'unjustifiable' to rewrite Roe's stories, takes on a special significance in this particular edition of *Gularabulu*. After all, the UWA Publishing edition of *Gularabulu*, published in 2016, follows in the wake of the original 1983 edition as well as a 1993 edition, both published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. The existence of three editions of this particular book is a testament to its enduring value, but it also presents an opportunity for interrogation.

Muecke is the editor of *Gularabulu* – a fact that in the UWA Publishing edition of this book is confined to a tiny mention on the copyright page. Muecke's contributions are not acknowledged elsewhere – not on the front cover, the book's spine, the title page, or even at the end of his 16-page introduction. Previous editions of *Gularabulu* named Muecke everywhere but on the front cover. The UWA Publishing edition mentions Muecke in its back cover copy, but it does not make clear the nature of his contributions to the book: 'Stephen Muecke is a leading Australian academic whose work has encompassed a number of disciplines in the humanities. With Paddy Roe, Muecke is co-writer of the prize-winning *Reading the Country*.' This begs the question, 'Did Muecke also coauthor *Gularabulu*?' The answer is 'no', but that is not clear from the UWA Publishing edition of this book.

Why does any of this matter? Because how Muecke's, and also Roe's, intentionality was transferred to the page matters deeply in a book like *Gularabulu*. Muecke is very clear that he does not want to 'take away the poet's "license"', which is another way of saying he wants to respect Roe's intentions. For Muecke, this translates into a highly unconventional approach to transcribing Roe's oral stories:

The texts are divided into lines whenever the narrator pauses. The length of these pauses is indicated by one dash per second of pause. Hesitations in mid-line, at which points the breath is held at the glottis, are indicated by commas. (17)

Roe, a Nyigina man born sometime around 1912 in the northwest corner of Western Australia, was already a legendary figure when he sat down with PhD student Muecke in the late 1970s. The stories Roe shared with Muecke represent 'the continuation and reassertion of an Indigenous oral narrative tradition' (13). However, the form of the stories as they are found in *Gularabulu* represents a remarkable innovation, as can be seen in the following representative excerpt:

so this old fella -  
 come back with fish one day he can't find his missus---  
 he waited there till late --  
 so he said 'What happened to my missus? -  
 must be gone fishing ah that's all right" he said -- (24)

Book reviews: *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* by Paddy Roe. Per Henningsgaard. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 2, May 2017.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

This excerpt, which follows the rules for transcription set by Muecke, clearly looks like poetry – which explains Muecke’s aforementioned assertion that, ‘when language is read as poetic, it is the form of the language itself, as well as its underlying content, which is important’ (9). Indeed, it is precisely the *form* of the stories contained within *Gularabulu* that make it such an interesting and important book.

It is with great regret, then, that I report that the form of *Gularabulu* has been mangled in its most recent edition. In the five-line excerpt above, for example, the number of dashes at the end of a line – each dash representing a one-second pause by Roe – differs from earlier editions of the book. In fact, four of the five lines have different numbers of dashes at the end as compared to earlier editions. Of course, without access to the original recordings of Roe’s oral storytelling, it is difficult to say which edition got it right, but there are strong indications that it is not the UWA Publishing edition. For example, the typo in the fifth line where a double quotation mark is used in place of a single quotation mark, and also the lack of a space before the dashes in the second line, suggest lax copyediting standards. What we find in these five lines is symptomatic of problems that run through the entire book. Indeed, it seems likely that the notoriously problematic process of optical character recognition (OCR) was used to create this particular edition based on a scan of a previous edition. Furthermore, in the story ‘Big Dog’, 13 lines have been mistakenly duplicated – they appear both in the middle of the story and at the very end. These are not small problems; these things matter for all the reasons Muecke explains in the introduction to *Gularabulu*.

Paddy Roe’s *Gularabulu* is an incredibly beautiful and affecting book, not to mention a landmark work of Indigenous Australian storytelling, but I recommend that readers find a used copy of either edition published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

**Per Henningsgaard**