FROM BOTH Lynette Russell’s memoir and her scholarly study we can draw the same sad conclusion: the gulf of understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous society has led to a damaging, though not deadly, fracture of the Aboriginal community and culture. This conclusion is hardly revelatory but, in partnership, these books do shed light on the subtler effects of systemically racist public policy on private worlds. *Savage Imaginings* explores the discourses that have shaped public perceptions of ‘the Aborigine’, while *A Little Bird Told Me* journeys into a concealed family history to uncover the cross-generational secrets and hurt that stemmed from such perceptions.

In *Savage Imaginings*, Russell studies official, academic and popular depictions of Australian indigenous culture, as they appear globally in texts, catalogues and museum displays. She argues that these depictions work to construct a category of ‘Aborigine’ that denies individual identities. Texts such as *Walkabout* magazine portrayed indigenous culture as homogenous, static and primitive. Russell is interested in uncovering the specific reasons for such portrayals. For example, she argues that, as a publication of the Australian National Travel Association, *Walkabout* used Aborigines alternately as anthropological subjects and as symbols of the nation’s progress. The lone, anonymous figure standing on an escarpment with one leg half raised represented the pre-contact age, and showed the world just how far the distant young colony had come.

My most treasured possession is a 1975 volume of the Briggs family genealogy. It is a record from a university psychology department that documents my Aboriginal family, following the line from Tasmanian Aborigines to my father. Having been born in 1978, my claim to this heritage is staked by two words, ‘Baby Katy’, scrawled on a scrap of paper that sits next to my father’s name. Despite knowing better, I have always treasured that as ‘evidence’ of my Aboriginal heritage.

By being not obviously dark skinned, yet identifying as Aboriginal, I have found that it is considered paradoxical — or worse, hypocritical — to drink caffe latte, live in Fitzroy and still consider oneself ‘authentically’ Aboriginal. While I can partially understand such beliefs, I would find it ludicrous to subscribe to the underlying philosophy that categorises ‘Aborigine’ as one who lives a ‘traditional’ life in ‘natural’ surroundings. As Russell points out, such outdated stereotypes are premised on the assumption that a clear demarcation still exists between black and white in modern day Australia. While it may be entirely appropriate and relevant for some to form an identity based on separatism, for most, the black/white dichotomy is a damaging myth. I am of Aboriginal heritage, but have been raised in a mostly ‘white’ community. I find it difficult to identify as solely belonging to one group or the other. Like Russell, I wonder where I belong in the popular model of reconciliation between ‘black’ and ‘white’.

Russell says the impetus for writing *Savage Imaginings* grew from an interest in how much her own family’s...
Aboriginal story had been constructed by external discourses. It is disappointing but probably inevitable that, in writing a memoir exploring secrets and cover-ups, Russell seems heavily reliant on such discourses. Obstacles in the path of uncovering hidden indigenous stories seem almost to perpetuate the privileging of ‘white’ history over ‘black’.

Unlike Russell, I was fortunate to be given an insight into my heritage at a young age and encouraged to fully embrace it. I was told stories and secrets that gave me a sense of belonging to the Koori community, before I could really articulate what that was. Still, I can feel guilty of claiming something I don’t feel I’ve suffered for. Shame and suffering have been all-pervasive elements of Aboriginal history, and were Russell’s springboard for writing her memoir. After recounting a frightening meeting with a mentally disturbed man who masturbated on her, Russell writes: ‘I knew with certainty that there was shame in what had happened … I knew that the only way to deal with shame was to keep silent.’

_A Little Bird Told Me_ reveals the solace taken in silence and secrecy by Russell’s grandmother and great-grandmother, and adopted by her. When confronted with immitigable stigmas, in this case concerning indigenous identity and mental health, it was far safer and kinder to bury any association with the stigmatised. Russell’s true heritage was always denied to her by her grandmother, her dark skin covered up by pale make-up and claims of an exotic ‘Polynesian princess’ ancestry. When she began to search for the truth, Russell found that her great-grandmother, Emily, had spent fourteen years of her life being sent to and from ‘mental hospitals’ for hearing voices in her head, while her family tried to bury the stigma of having a mentally disturbed relative. Ironically, being inside the hospital allowed Emily finally to be herself, under the protective banner of ‘madness’. She freely admitted to her true heritage by calling herself a ‘darkie’ and forming her only friendship, with the other Aboriginal woman there. Russell wonders if the voices Emily heard, and was committed for, represent a sense of repressed Aboriginal spirituality, and if they would now be considered a gift rather than an affliction.

As a memoir, the book doesn’t make use of the author’s own memories and knowledge so much as it does a strange mix of facts and speculation. The narrative suffers from telling rather than showing, with a neatly outlined chronology of events interrupted at random moments by odd rhetorical questions. At times, I felt the questions were inserted as rather crude signposts.

Despite its quirks, _A Little Bird Told Me_ complements _Savage Imaginings_ in offering a compelling case for what Russell terms the ‘hybrid space’. By pursuing black-and-white categories of black or white, Russell argues, we leave no room for the category of ‘we’. ‘If anything is to be salvaged from my grandmother’s life … I hope that it is the opportunity to create a hybrid space, our place, where we can be many things at the same time.’