



Ancient Aboriginal Tales in New Retellings

Lee Barwood

Klassic Koalas



The Dreamtime is Australia's time before time. Animals and birds and plants came into being and took their current forms, and Australia became what it is today—a place of wonder and diversity, populated by unique creatures found nowhere else.

Now, however, Australia and its creatures are under threat—from habitat destruction, global warming, and the incursions of predators not native to Australia. This book of Aboriginal stories, retold by award-winning author Lee Barwood, brings the time of Dreaming to life. From the Great Flood to the story of how the koala lost its tail, these are some glimpses into ancient Aboriginal folklore.

The accompanying illustrations are by Joanne Ehrich and artists of the Central Ohio Art Academy directed by Donna Boiman.

Each copy of the book contributes to the Australian Wildlife Hospital, a major project Australia Zoo Wildlife Warriors Worldwide Ltd, for the preservation of the koala and other Australian creatures under threat.

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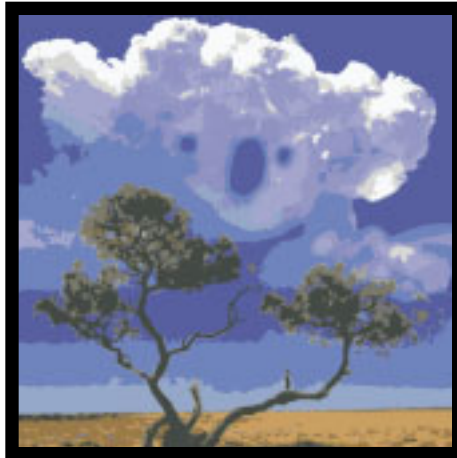


A portion of the proceeds from the sales of this book will be allocated to the Australian Wildlife Hospital, a major project of Australia Zoo Wildlife Warriors Ltd. To find out how you can make a difference and support Wildlife Warriors, the wildlife conservation charity established by Steve and Terri Irwin, please visit www.wildlifewarriors.org.

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by Lee Barwood



San Mateo, California



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Preface

When one contemplates retelling of stories that belong to an ancient people, there are many things to be considered. How much of the original structure does a writer keep? How does that writer find the voice to tell new versions of something far, far older than herself?

And above all, why does a writer tell a story not her own?

The books and websites cited in the bibliography have all helped me to find the structure of these tales ancient before the sailing of Cook or even of Columbus or Leif Ericsson. Some of these sources contain retellings, too, that brought the voices (and in some cases, prejudices) of their authors, along with some non-Australian elements, to stories that guided original Australians in their quest for wisdom and their desire to explain the wonders of the world around them. I chose to keep the bones of the stories, in some cases paring them of elements that did not seem to belong, and in others adding elements that would make the tales my own interpretation—as has been the tradition in oral storytelling since there have been stories and tellers to tell them.

The voice is my own, developed through years of telling other stories—many based on folklore and traditions of various nations, but all made of the whole cloth of imagination.

And the desire to tell these stories comes from one thing: A love affair with the koala.

When I was perhaps a year old, I was given a stuffed koala sent from Australia during World War II by my father for one of my sisters. While stationed there, he had met the gentle koala; he brought back photographs of himself, in his Navy uniform, holding these living treasures. And he'd bought two of the toys to send to his young daughters in America, along with copies of a book telling of the adventures of Aborigine children.

Both my sisters' koalas eventually became mine, and in time my father bought me my own, also sent all the way from Australia—as well as my own copy of *The Way of the Whirlwind*, the story of Nungaree and Jungaree and their quest to rescue their baby brother from the great wind that had carried him off. Although at this writing I have not been to Australia, my earliest understanding of the magic of storytelling is colored by Australian stories; my earliest memories of the animal there to comfort me on the darkest of nights are all of the koala.

Now, however, the koala and many other wonderful Australian animals are in trouble from global warming, habitat destruction, and the incursions of predators not native to Australia. Their time may be coming to an end, as drought and fire and deforestation take their toll. So I offer these tales to try to remind us all that animals and birds have as much of a right to a safe and continued existence as we ourselves do—and in an attempt to preserve the wonder that I knew as a child when I first met that most magical of Australian animals, the koala. Each purchase of this book will make a contribution to the welfare of the animals in Australia—so this is my chance to give back in gratitude, in however small a way, for the joy, comfort, and magic that Australian animals, most particularly the koala, have given me since my earliest memories.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this, and please be mindful of the needs of all the creatures of this earth. In 1854, in another wisdom tradition, Chief Seattle spoke from his heart when he reminded us that we are all part of the web of life, and we are all connected. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

*Lee Barwood
New Jersey
Christmas Eve, 2006*

Didane and the Trees



In the Dreamtime, the Carnarvon Gorge area in Queensland was hot, and dry, and barren. The cliffs were beautiful; dramatic colors moved with the sun across the rocks looming high overhead, and the bottoms of the gorges were enveloped in cool darkness. But nothing grew there; the earth and rocks were dusty and bare. The people loved it and its rugged beauty, but they longed for the softness trees and green growing things would bring.

Animals and birds living in the sunlight and shadows also wished for fertile ground. Lush plants, with green leaves, beautiful flowers, and fine fruits, would give shelter and better food for everyone.

The elders considered the matter, and decided to hold a great Corroboree to decide how they could bring trees and green growing things to their home. The people talked for a long time, and finally one man stood. He waved an arm toward the clouds in the blue sky, and said, "Beautiful trees grow up there in the sky. Can we knock down some of their seeds to grow here?"

The warriors thought this a fine idea and declared a great contest. All the warriors lined up with their best boomerangs, taunting each other with boasts of prowess; each declared he would be the one to bring the softness of green growing things to the Carnarvon Gorge. The line grew longer and longer; the sun grew hotter and hotter. The competition began.

One by one, with mighty throws, warriors sent boomerangs sailing into the sky, high above the heads of the crowds. Each brought wild cheers; then, as each vanished from sight, a silence fell as the crowd thought perhaps, this time, seeds would fall to earth in a shower of growth....



...Then a collective gasp as each boomerang returned, followed by—nothing at all.

Time after time this was repeated, till all the warriors had done their best. When the last warrior's boomerang had returned with no sign of seeds from the celestial trees, the crowd murmured in sorrow and disappointment. The Corroboree broke up; people moved away in twos and threes, shaking their heads and wondering what would become of their beautiful but barren land.

Before they could go far, one man so old his beard had turned the color of the white puffy clouds high above, where the trees grew in such abundance, said, "Why don't we ask Didane to throw his boomerang? His arms are so big and strong maybe he can do it."

In those days of the Dreamtime, when men and animals lived together in reasonable harmony, Didane the koala had the strongest arms. Even today, the koala's arms hold him aloft all day and all night in the tall gum tree that is his home, clinging to a branch, without danger of his falling. The others nodded, talking hopefully. A warrior was dispatched to Didane, who agreed to try.

Everyone gathered back at the Corroboree. Soon they saw Didane come into view, carrying his largest boomerang and accompanied by his animal friends. Kangaroos and wallabies set the pace for wombats and porcupines; a blue-tongued lizard crawled after them, glancing hopefully at the sky for signs of rain. It was a very hot day; the heat waves radiated up from the dry ground, and his blue tongue was very dry. The king brown snake slithered along behind them, trailed by a family of goannas. Even the green tree snake came, hoping his friend Didane would make it possible for him to have a tree to climb again. He was tired of living only on the ground.

The birds came in flocks, too, to watch such an unusual feat. The red wattlebirds flew excitedly, chattering to each other all the way; they loved forests and were hopeful that their friend Didane could cause one to grow for them. The rosellas and pardalotes and fairy wrens came too, hoping for some sign that they would soon have trees to roost in. They arranged themselves so that they too could watch, and began to preen. The gang-gang parrots and cockatoos wanted the best view possible, so they soared up, up, and up, and fluttered back and forth as everyone below waited.

The people cleared a big circle for Didane. He walked to the center, gazed up at the sky and the beautiful trees that grew there high among the clouds, and then nodded to himself. He reached his strong arm back and then, with a mighty swing, hurled his boomerang high, high into the air.

The people gasped as Didane's boomerang sailed above their heads, above the whole Corroboree, and quickly flew above the beautiful birds that soared in the sky. The cockatoos soared in its wake, hoping to see where it went, and higher and higher they rose into the air. Up, up, and up the boomerang went, singing through the air, cleaving the clouds as it spun away, until it too vanished from sight as the warriors' boomerangs had. At last the gang-gangs had to drop back; it had flown much higher than they could. They landed near their friends.

Silently the people watched the skies; the animals watched too, Didane and the kangaroos and goannas and wombats who had come with him. For a long time they watched, and at last the people began to lose courage. Some began to cry at the thought that even Didane was not powerful enough to bring down the seeds they so desperately needed. And some began to walk away dejectedly, their heads low and their eyes on the ground.

But then there was a distant sound—the sound of a boomerang growing closer and louder. And there was another sound, too: the rustle and ping of seeds—seeds of all sizes and shapes, falling from the skies above to bounce and rattle on the ground as the boomerang returned. Didane had done it—he had brought seeds to the Carnarvon Gorge! Within moments the dusty and rocky ground was covered with a barrage of seeds, big, tiny, round, oval, in colors and shapes that the people had never seen before.

They all began to cheer and shout, and the kookaburra laughed with glee to see his friend's success. Didane had done what none of their warriors could do—he had gotten the celestial seeds for the people and animals, and now the earth would grow fertile and soft. As they gathered around Didane and began to celebrate, a soft rain began to fall, wetting the seeds and the rich earth alike, making all ready for the lush vegetation that would now grow from the heavenly seeds.

Glossary

Bandicoot: A small marsupial with a long, narrow head and a long snout.

Bat: A nocturnal flying mammal.

Beetle: A hard-shelled insect.

Big Man of the East: A character in Aboriginal folklore who blew daylight away at the beginning of night.

Bilby: A type of bandicoot with large rabbit-like ears and keen hearing.

Billabong: A pool formed by a stream that can be stagnant or that flows only intermittently; a stream branch that dead-ends and leads nowhere.

Blue splendid wren: A small bird with brilliant blue plumage.

Blue-tongued lizard: A member of the skink family with a blue tongue that it displays when threatened.

Blue Ulysses butterfly: A magnificent intense blue butterfly native to Australia.

Boomerang: A curved shaped piece of wood that returns when thrown, used in hunting or as a weapon.

Brolga: A large crane, gray in color, with a featherless red head and gray crown.

Bunyip: Variously described as an evil spirit or an animal with a hairy horse-like head, a large furry body, and a loud bellowing cry, it was thought to live in billabongs or near water and to hunt people and animals.

Burrawang: A large palm-like evergreen tree.

Butcherbird: A bird with a beautiful song that lives in mangroves; its name comes from the way in which it kills its prey.

Carpet snake: A large non-poisonous member of the python family with characteristic markings on its skin.

Cassowary: This large, flightless bird with brilliant blue neck lives in the forest areas of Far North Queensland.

Catbird: A small shy bird with green plumage that has a catlike cry among its calls.

Cockatiel: These smallest of cockatoo birds have white or gray feathers, a yellow crest, and orange cheeks.

Cockatoo: A family of sociable Australian birds living in large groups; they have beautiful crested heads.

Corella: A white Australian bird with a colorful face and yellow underplumage.

Corroboree: A gathering, meeting, or council.

Crimson rosella: A colorful Australian bird and member of the parrot family.

Crimson-crested gang-gang cockatoo: An Australian bird with showy red feathers on its head; it is related to the galah and white cockatoos.

Crocodile: A large meat-eating reptile. It can swim and is quite fast on land.

Dingo: The “native dog” of Australia, the dingo is thought to have arrived between 3500-4000 years ago. It howls but does not bark.

Doryanthes: Also known as the Giant Spear Lily or Gynea Lily, this is a showy and large plant that is triggered to flowering by bush fires. Its blooms are red and spectacular.

Dreamtime: The Time before Time in Aboriginal lore in which all things were created.

Duck-billed platypus: One of two monotremes (egg-laying mammals) in the world (the echidna is the other), the platypus has a “duck’s bill” and webbed feet and spends most of its time in the water.

Echidna: A monotreme (egg-laying mammal), the echidna is the oldest surviving mammal on the planet. It has spines similar to those of a porcupine and carries its young, once hatched, in a pouch.

Eel: A long, snakelike creature that lives in the lakes and coastal rivers of Australia.

Emu: A large (nearly six feet tall) flightless bird that can run very swiftly and swim extremely well.

Epacris: A plant of the heath family native to Australia.

Eucalyptus tree: There are over 600 native species in Australia, but the koala can only eat from about 36 of them. The leaves yield an aromatic medicinal oil.

Fairy wren: A small bird with spectacularly colored plumage native to Australia. It is related to the Blue Splendid Wren.

Fire ants: An ant, not native to Australia, that has a painful sting and lives in large colonies.

Flying fox: A member of the bat family, the flying fox is nocturnal and feeds on pollen, nectar, and fruit.

Frilled neck lizard: An Australian icon, this small lizard spreads its frill when threatened and runs about on its hind legs.

Galah: A beautiful, rose-pink and gray member of the parrot family native to Australia.

Gang-gang parrot: A redheaded member of the parrot family native to Australia.

Ghost bat: A small and rare Australian bat with gray and white fur that appears ghostlike when flying overhead.

Goanna: A large lizard found in Australia; it is a member of the monitor family.

Green tree frog: Bright green with red eyes and yellow feet, this frog is a familiar sight in Australia.

Gum tree: Another name for eucalyptus tree, and home to koalas, among other species.

Gundir: A powerful, great spirit figure in Aboriginal lore.

Gunyah: A rough or temporary shelter in the bush.

Joey: The young of a koala, or marsupial in general.

Kangaroo: A large marsupial mammal that stands on its hind legs and tail and hops from place to place. It carries its young in a pouch.

King brown snake: A large venomous snake common in the Australian desert.

Koala: A marsupial mammal, often called the native bear, with large furry ears and long claws for climbing. It carries its young in a pouch or on its back and lives in eucalyptus trees.

Kookaburra: A large member of the kingfisher family, this bird has a loud laughing call.

Kowari: A small carnivorous marsupial with a short brush-tipped tail and a pointed nose.

Lime green priamus butterfly: A spectacular brightly-colored butterfly native to Australia.

Major Mitchell: Also known as a Leadbeater parrot, this is known to be the most beautiful of cockatoos with magnificent white, pink, and yellow crest.

Marsupial: A mammal that rears its young in its pouch. Most marsupials live only in Australia.

Marsupial Rat: A marsupial resembling, but not related to, the rats of the rest of the world.

Mockingbird: One of several birds in Australia that mimic the calls of other birds. The largest and showiest is the shy Superb Lyrebird.

Mulgara: A small marsupial with a crest of black hair on its tail.

Numbat: A small marsupial that feeds on termites.

Nullah: A type of club or weapon.

Outback: The interior of Australia, a desert wilderness with mountain ranges and widely scattered towns.

Parakeet: Also called budgerigars or budgies, these are small, colorful, friendly birds native to Australia.

Pardalote: A tiny Australian bird that lives in the eucalyptus canopy.

Pelican: A large black and white bird that lives near water and fishes for its food.

Piping shrike: Also known as the white-backed magpie, this bird is the symbol of the South Australian Government.

Possum: Related to possums in other parts of the world, yet different in appearance, these Australian marsupials often have furry tails.

Quokka: A small marsupial that resembles a wallaby.

Quoll: A spotted carnivorous marsupial with a shrill, catlike cry. It is also known as a tiger cat.

Rainbow bee-eater: A turquoise green and yellow bird with a black stripe across its eye, it really does eat bees.

Rainbow lorikeet: A very colorful, friendly, and playful bird native to Australia.

Red wattlebird: A member of the honeyeater family, this bird is large and noisy, and gets its name from the red wattles on either side of its neck.

Redhead: The short name for the Red-browed Firetail Finch, a native bird of Australia.

Robin: One of several native Australian robin species that includes the Flame Robin and the Scarlet Robin.

Rosella: One of several varieties of colorful Australian parrots.

Shaman: A medicine man or wise man among the Aborigines who works magic to help his people.

Skink: One of many lizard species native to Australia.

Starfish: A sea-dwelling five-armed (or more) creature

that lives in the waters off Australia.

Sugar glider: A small member of the possum family able to glide between trees. It cannot fly, but glides on membranes that stretch between its front and back legs. Its name comes from its love of sweet things.

Sulphur-crested cockatoo: A large white Australian parrot with a sulphur-yellow crest and yellow underwings.

Superb parrot: A beautifully colored parrot native to Australia.

Tasmanian devil: A small, bad-tempered carnivorous marsupial, the Tasmanian devil is mostly black, with occasional white markings, and a short, thick tail.

Tasmanian tiger: Also called a thylacine, the Tasmanian tiger resembled a large dog with a long body. It had a big head, a stiff, heavy tail, and stripes on the back portion of its body. It is believed extinct.

Tit: One of several showy, colorful little birds, also called shrike-tits, native to Australia.

Vulture-crowned leatherhead: Also called the noisy friarbird, this is a bald-headed bird native to Australia.

Wallaby: A marsupial resembling a small kangaroo.

Wallaroo: A marsupial that is smaller than a great or red kangaroo but larger than a wallaby, with shaggy dark gray fur and a bare black snout.

Waratah: A beautiful showy small tree or large shrub native to Australia, with numerous small red flowers and red bracts.

Western rosella: A beautiful, yet shy, and extremely colorful member of the rosella family.

Whale: Any of several large seagoing mammals that inhabit the oceans off Australia.

Whiptail wallaby: A small wallaby with a long, thin tail, white-tipped ears, and a white face stripe.

Wombat: A small and shy furry marsupial that lives in burrows underground.

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