

Racehorses: respecting Country and a crucial council vote

Monday night's council vote on racehorse training at Levy's will also be a test of our true respect for Indigenous culture.

**From artist to children's
author: Fiona Clarke**



“When I was growing up, the only children’s books were fairytales or stories about a big ship and a fella called Captain Cook”. Portrait of Fiona Clarke by Warrnambool photographer [John \(Jack Wilkins\)](#).

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W[/dropcap]hen **Fiona Clarke** was a little girl growing up in the 60s, most picture books were either British, based on fairytales, or about “a big ship and a fella called Captain Cook”.

“And Dr Seuss – he was good, I liked him,” Fiona says, laughing.

There were certainly very few children’s books that told stories from Aboriginal culture and none that reflected Fiona’s heritage as part of the Kirrae Whurrong clan in South-West Victoria.

In the second half of her life, Fiona has found herself at the forefront of changing all that, having published her first children's book in late 2012 and starting work on a second.



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As an established visual artist, Fiona, who lives in Merrivale, is best known for her paintings, sculptures and tapestries, but she is now bringing her storytelling and fine artistic ability together through books.

"It was something that I always wanted to do, but I didn't know where to start, like how to find a publisher when they all say 'no'," she says.



Fiona in her studio (aka the kitchen table) with copies of her first book, *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow*, and the blank canvas for her second book that is based around the rainbow serpent.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] E [/dropcap]arly-childhood educator **Claire Jennings** became the bridge between Fiona's talent and the publishing world and persuaded her to write and illustrate *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow*, published by One Day Hill (which has also published work by **Derek Guille**, **Shane Howard** and **Archie Roach**).

Minkgill is the Kirrae Whurrong word for "star" which she discovered after Shane Howard and her late brother, Ian, individually insisted that she read the classic book about Aboriginal culture in South-West Victoria by James Dawson, first published in 1881.

Shortly after the book was published, Fiona embarked on a series of storytelling workshops around Warrnambool and Melbourne, where she was met with a rapturous response by her young audience.

At the end of one storytelling session, a little girl approached Fiona and, with her hands across her heart, declared it was "the best story I've heard in my whole life!"



The artist becomes the subject: a portrait of Fiona by the late Brian Dunlop (1938-2009), *Sundown, Sunrise*, 1993. Image: [Culture Victoria](#) and the [Warrnambool Art Gallery](#).

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]his time, the inspiration for Fiona's second book has come from her great-niece, **Meekah Merriman**, who is just starting to read. Fiona tells a story about how Meekah walked up to her mother, lifted her shirt to show her rainbow-coloured *Dora the Explorer* belt, and said "the rainbow serpent is coming".

That simple sentence settled in Fiona's mind and she began to pen a story around the title.

"*The Rainbow Serpent is Coming* has come out as an environmental story, about the land and how we are treating the land," she says.

With the writing almost finished, Fiona is turning her mind to the illustrations that need to be painted for each page. A blank canvas – literally – is spread out on her kitchen table, which she uses as a studio.

It is a space she shares with her teenage daughter, **Patricia**, who is a keen artist, and her husband **Ken McKean**, whom she first met as a five or six year old after talking about the "walking fish" in his parent's pet shop; they have been married more than 30 years.



Fiona's father, the late Banjo (Henry) Clarke as a young man. He continues to inspire Fiona's creative work, including her decision to write books for children.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] F [/dropcap]iona's birth family also continues to have a pervasive influence on her work.

As the youngest of six children born to the late Audrey and "Banjo" (Henry) Clarke, a respected elder of the Kirrae Whurrong, Fiona grew up surrounded by the energy and chatter of a large family.

"My father loved children," she says.

“He always loved to hear the sound of the children’s laughter and said how much he missed hearing that when they were gone, grown up and moved away.”

Fiona tells how Banjo often described children’s laughter as “bringing colour to the world”.

“They bring brightness to the world and Dad always talked about that, right up until the day he died, actually.

“This is why the pictures in my books are always bright – not too much earthy brown stuff,” she laughs.

[box] **Fiona recently completed a mural, with Bronwyn Ferguson, at the entrance to Warrnambool College. You can find out more about Fiona’s artwork on her website [here](#) and see her talk [about her work here](#). *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow* is available through Warrnambool Books.** [/box]

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Charming bookshop starts new chapter



Megan Langdon first dreamt of running her own bookshop 30 years ago and now operates the gorgeous The Little Bookshop, in Portland.

[box] Unfortunately The Little Bookshop closed in late July 2014. We wish Megan well for whatever she does next – she deserves every success.[/box]

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] B
outique bookshops are making a comeback and they don't come any cuter than the charming **The Little Bookshop** in Portland.

Anybody who loves books (and we know that because you are reading *Bluestone*, that this includes you), will find that their heart slows and they breathe a bit more deeply when they walk into the quiet, stylish haven that **Megan Langdon** has created in the historic town.

To be accurate, we should say *re-created*, because The Little Bookshop is in its second incarnation.

The original bookshop started three years ago in Percy St, which is one block away from its present Bentick St location, but the high overheads that came from being in the main street of Portland eventually proved too much and, earlier this year, Megan made the tough decision to close.

"It was such a huge, emotional decision," Megan said.

"I got my son, Matthew, to announce it on my Facebook page for me, because he looked after all that side of things, and then I got to work on closing it down," she said.

There was only one hitch: Megan's supporters, customers and book fans from around the South-West were not having a bar of it. They responded to the Facebook post by the hundreds, saying that Megan couldn't possibly close such a lovely shop that had made books into something special again.

“It sent me on an emotional rollercoaster, to be honest, because having made the very hard decision to close, I had to question all over again whether it was the right decision,” Megan said.



Megan stood at the crossroads earlier this year, having decided to close – then relocate – her bookshop: “I knew that I hadn’t finished being a bookseller.”

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] A [dropcap]s fate would have it, one of Megan’s friends, **Milly Cameron**, had a small shop available right on the waterfront that she had been using as a pop-up gallery to exhibit work by her sisters-in-law, **Pat Cameron** and **Anne Langdon**. Megan was invited to take on the lease for her bookshop and to keep the gallery going.

If only it were that simple.

In the interim, Megan had also been offered several jobs, based on her previous career in adult education, and had to choose between the stability and regular income of a teaching position...or still running her own little bookshop.

“Every time I thought about it, the books kept winning. I knew that I hadn’t finished being a bookseller,” she said.



Beautiful antique French items are also for sale, reflecting Megan’s love of Paris that she visited for her 50th birthday.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] T
[/dropcap]he Little Bookshop was a 30-year-dream in the making for Megan, who has devoured books since growing up as a child in Ballarat. She remembers moving from Ballarat to Melbourne as a 17-year-old and being so deeply lonely that it was only books that saved her.

She also remembers walking into a bookshop in Echuca more than three decades ago – “The Tangled Garden, I think it was called” – and being completely enchanted by the surroundings. It was then Megan decided that, one day, she would run her own bookshop.

Being a single parent, however, made it almost impossible for Megan to pursue her dream until many years later when, armed with her superannuation, she moved to Portland from Geelong after visiting it several times to see her son, Ben, who is a school teacher.



And then there are the books: wrapped to take home in paper and brown string.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] I
[/dropcap] keeping with her dream, Megan’s bookshop sells only quality fiction and specialises in promoting Australian authors. She also sells a select range of beautiful French antique items, including French linen, that reflects her love

of Paris, which she visited for her 50th birthday.

This specialisation means that Megan works in with Portland's other booksellers – there are five in total – who all have their own areas of expertise.

"We send customers to each other, because we all do things a little differently," she said.

[box] You can find The Little Bookshop at 51 Bentick St, Portland. Ph: (03) 5523 1440. Visit The Little Bookshop [Facebook page here](#). [/box]

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Different life stages for pages



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] G
[/dropcap]iven **Joe Logan** is a reader, an English teacher and a bibliophile, what she does to used and old books can only be described as tough love.

In order to create her craft as an upcycler of pre-loved books, she first needs to pull them apart or, at the very least, remove several pages, fiddle with the spines, or redecorate the covers with an assortment of creative twists.

“The first hard cover book I had to pull apart was very hard, but it does get easier: you do get over the desecration,” Joe, from Portland, laughs.

During the working week, Joe teaches senior English classes at Portland Secondary School, but in her spare time she works as

one half of [luciandjoe](#) (pronounced Luci and Joe) creating new-from-old pieces using bookbinding and papercraft techniques.



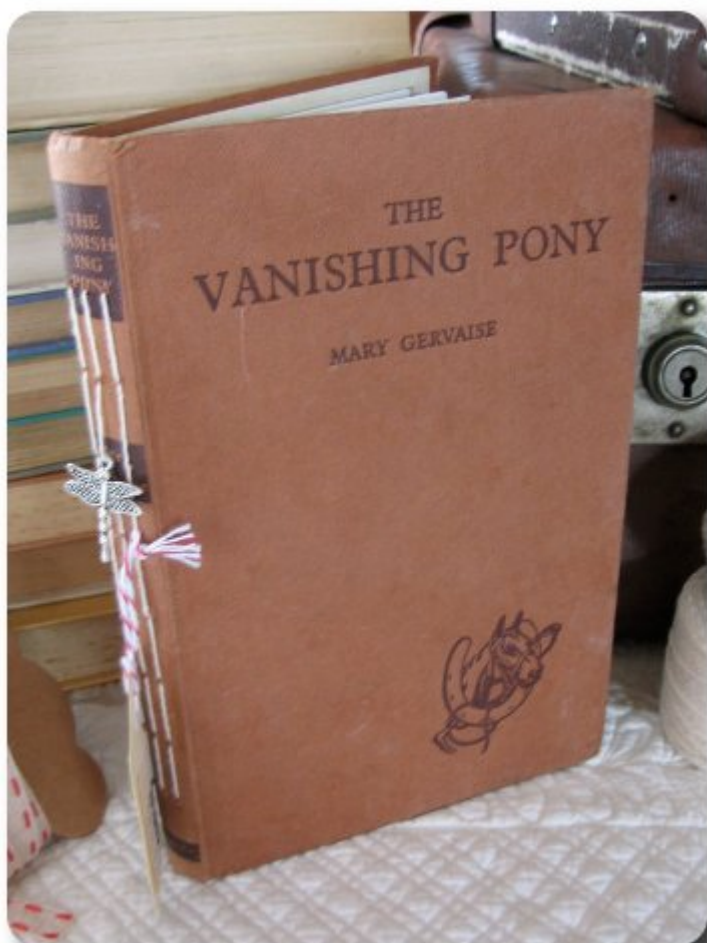
[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] While Joe enrolled in several workshops to learn the traditional methods of bookbinding/restoration and papercraft, she has since turned those techniques on their head to create her own style.

“Basically I learned how to do things the proper way and then butchered those techniques to create something very individual, but which still maintains the integrity of the original book,” she says.

Joe scours op-shops, tip-shops and secondhand stores for pre-loved books that may be a bit crusty, but still have a certain

charm or character: perhaps an interesting cover, for example, or some lovely illustrations.

The books are then transformed into something useful and beautiful by having fresh, blank pages added, some old pages removed, and a freshening up of their covers through beading, or stitching, or by adding a special trinket.



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] T
[/dropcap]hrough this technique, an old encyclopaedia starts a new life as a funky travel journal, a cookbook can become a photo album, or a long-forgotten adventure book is reborn as a diary.

“Every book I select has its own character and I keep that character, because that is also what makes each piece individual and appealing,” Joe explains.

Like most creators, Joe started out making gifts for her friends about 10 years ago, before **Megan Langdon**, from [The Little Bookshop](#), in Portland, saw the potential in the unique products and began to stock a few pieces. The response prompted Joe to “go public” and, in the past three years, she has started a market stall that visits Warrnambool, Ballarat, Port Fairy and Geelong, while also setting up a shop online.

“People still really love books – they love the tactile nature of a book,” she says.

“And, at the same time, there is a resurgence in crafts and people are more appreciative of hand-made, quality possessions.”



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] A [dropcap]side from upcycling books, Joe creates a range of cards using her own photographs (such as those taken during a trip to Paris), or screenprinting her own designs.

“I am enjoying exploring the papercraft side of things a bit more and seeing what can be done with screenprinting and embroidery, for example, which brings together my love of paper and fabric,” she says.

People can also commission Joe for a one-off piece of work – perhaps using a book they have chosen – but she has had to knock back customers looking for a book restorer.

“When people ask me if I can restore one of their treasured books, I say ‘you might want to take a closer look at what I do to books!’”

Now we did mention earlier in this story that Joe is one half of luciandjoe, which means there is another half: Joe’s silent partner, Luci.

Luci is 11, white-haired and, despite having four paws, is not particularly dextrous. She is, however, Joe’s beloved Maltese Shih tzu and loves nothing more than a dog-eared book.



[box type="bio"] Joe Logan will run a series of workshops at the [Julia Street Creative Space](#), Portland, in March. Contact the space (03 5523 6566) for more details. Visit the luciandjoe online store [here](#) or find them on Facebook [here](#).[/box]



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