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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