Yarning Strong

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Teaching Truth

Yarning Strong and the case for staying in the room

by Helen Adam

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As an academic who spends much of her time in front of pre-service teachers or practising teachers, I recognise a particular kind of silence when we open a conversation that deals honestly with race, dispossession or the Stolen Generations.

It is not indifference. It is the silence of someone who cares a great deal and is terrified of getting it wrong. This is where the *Yarning Strong* anthologies and novels can help.

Books have always been one of the safest ways into uncomfortable or challenging conversations. A well-chosen text lets a teacher and a class approach dispossession, racism or grief through the lens of others' experiences, such as through a character, a poem or a diary entry rather than treating it as information to be delivered.

This gives students something shared to look at and explore together, so that difficult truths can be discussed without anyone feeling singled out or exposed.



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The *Yarning Strong* anthologies — Family, Identity, Land and Law — and accompanying novel studies such as *Milly's Secret*, are built to do exactly this. As well as providing a chance for First Nations students and teachers to see themselves reflected in literature, they were also compiled to give non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers the confidence to infuse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum, not as an occasional unit bolted on for NAIDOC Week, but as a normal part of classroom teaching.

The discomfort some teachers may feel opening the Law anthology's pages on Treaty and the Voice or reading the racial slurs that appear in *Milly's Secret*, is not evidence that the material is unsuitable for the classroom. It is evidence that the material is doing its job: bringing to the surface what has too often been left unsaid or avoided.



As a resource, the anthologies are genuinely strong. The curation is careful, the range of text types (poem, speech extract, diary, cartoon, play) gives teachers multiple entry points, and the decision to let Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices carry the material, rather than mediating everything through teacher commentary, is exactly right. The accompanying lesson plans example for *Millie's Secret* are similarly well built, with tiered enabling and extending activities and sensible checking-for-understanding routines.

Some teachers may find the suggested lesson length too short for content moving from bullying and racial slurs through to Treaty and the Voice. In situations like that, the sensible response is simply to flex and adapt.

Where needed, stretch lessons across two sessions rather than compress them. Teachers know their contexts best, so if needed, make small adaptations and shape the material to each group of students with confidence.



My advice, then, is not to wait until any discomfort disappears. Borrow the anthology's own architecture. Every text has been chosen and sequenced by people with the cultural authority that teachers often may feel they lack, and the pedagogical judgement calls are already made. The teacher's task is closer to stewardship than authorship — introducing primary voices from Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and creatives. Teachers can step back a little and let these voices lead the direction and conversations with students.

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Fear of causing offence is best met with preparation: for example, deciding in advance how slurs will be named and discussed, but not repeated by students. Fear of political controversy around Treaty and the Voice can be eased by anchoring discussion in verifiable fact and primary documents — there has been no treaty; the 1967 Referendum occurred — rather than in personal opinion. And the fear of simply not knowing enough is, frankly, the reason this resource exists.

It is worth remembering why the anthologies were built this way: racial and stereotypical myths remain genuinely current in the wider community, absorbed by children before they reach a classroom. A teacher who avoids this material does not create neutral ground; they leave those myths unchallenged.

With most schools now holding Reconciliation Action Plan commitments, using *Yarning Strong* is not an optional extension of good practice but a practical route to meeting an obligation the school already carries. Reluctance is not a barrier to using this resource; it is the starting condition it was designed to work with.

About the author



Dr Helen Adam is Associate Professor of Education at Edith Cowan University and President of PETAA. A leading researcher in children's literature and literacy, her work focuses on diversity, inclusion, and authentic representation in books for young readers. She is the author of *Transforming Practice: Transforming Lives Through Diverse Children's Literature*.

About Yarning Strong

Yarning Strong 2e is an engaging series of fiction novels and non-fiction anthologies for Years 3–6 written by First Nations authors, giving teachers and students quality curriculum-aligned content to explore First Nations cultures and perspectives.

This comprehensive and accessible series includes 32 quality fiction novels (including ten graphic novels) and four themed anthologies that include non-fiction material for Years 3–6 English classrooms.

Yarning Strong 2e is available now.

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