



## **The case for Gularabulu by Paddy Roe**

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## The case for Gularabulu by Paddy Roe

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### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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Telling stories for black and white alike involves a difficult negotiation of cultures and contexts.  
Luke Redmond

*If you had to argue for the merits of one Australian book, one piece of writing, what would it be? Welcome back to our occasional series in which our authors make the case for a work of their choosing. See the end of this article for information on how to get involved.*



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On publication in 1983 [Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley](#) was nothing less than ground-breaking. According to cultural theorist [Bob Hodge](#), it represented the birth of a new tradition in Australian Literature.

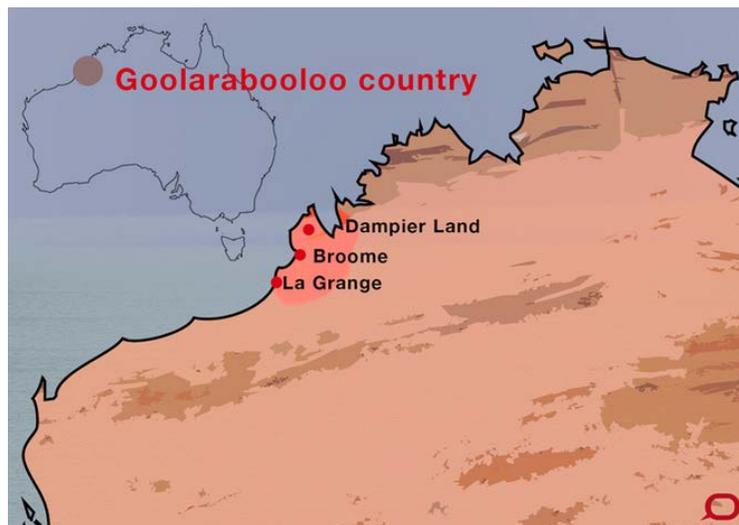
A collection of nine stories narrated by [Paddy Roe](#) – an Aboriginal Elder of Gularabulu (now written as Goolarabooloo) – and transcribed by Professor [Stephen Muecke](#), the book is a remarkable negotiation of Aboriginal and Settler cultures in the complex, enormous region known as the West Kimberley.

Paddy Roe categorises the stories into three different kinds. The first, “trustori”, are indeed true stories, but the heroes of these stories often do extraordinary things. We might call such tales “legends”.

The next group he calls “devil stori”, in which strange, even unnerving events can only be explained by the presence of a spirit being.

Then there’s “bugaregara” stories, or what we might call “myths”, which tell of the magnificent supernatural beings that created Country and Law.

The book’s title refers to a vast, liminal region of land and sea. Goolarabooloo (“the coast where the sun goes down”) is a large area of coastal country that stretches from La Grange in the south, right through Broome, and north to Dampier Land.



Goolarabooloo country. The Conversation

Consequently, Goolarabooloo encompasses multiple tribal groupings, and urban and non-urban lands. Roe stresses that the stories of Gularabulu belong not just to him and his family, but to all the people in this diverse region, including whitefellas.

To tell stories for black and white alike involves a difficult negotiation of cultures and contexts but, rather than shy from it, Roe embraces the challenge. Many of the stories’ characters exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. He talks to whitefellas so “they might be able to see us better than before”.

Like his characters, Paddy Roe crosses languages, genres and cultures as adeptly as he crosses country. Until the time

of his death in 2001, Roe was the head of a large family, and maintained a position of power as a negotiator between government departments in Broome and the surrounding Aboriginal communities.

Prior to assuming such responsibilities, Roe had long negotiated the myriad differences between indigenous and non-indigenous societies. A fully-initiated Nyigina law man, he also spent many years travelling across the Kimberley as a drover, before being contracted to work as a repairer of windmills. He met Stephen Muecke in the 1970s, when Muecke was visiting Broome for the first time as a young PhD student.

The ever-present possibilities of transformation and expansion in Gularabulu give Roe's narratives a distinctly contemporary feel. The absence of any controlling, authorial point of view contributes to a plenitude of explanations for why or how things happen. Roe's landscapes are richly poetic, full of various rhythms that allow them to become more than static literary representations.

After all, no place is still in Goolarabooloo country.

The ground is alive with meat ants, the horizon is thrashing with acacias or ragged swells. Roe's stories, like the places in which they are told, are alive with an energy that thoroughly captivates Muecke, who takes them from local yarns into the global realm of literature, from oral narrative into written poetry. Gularabulu is **an example of being** "always here, and always on the move".

Roe and Muecke use a number of strategies in order to allow Gularabulu to "travel" across the locales included in the narrative. Roe's Aboriginal English, as Muecke notes in a useful introduction, is a crucial mode of communication between Aboriginal people of various language groups. Furthermore, it is also a way in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can communicate.

For Muecke, then, Roe's could be "the language of 'bridging' between the vastly different European and Aboriginal cultures".

Consequently, one could say that Roe's language articulates a distinct mode of poetics and politics: the mode of the in-between. Here, it matters as much that Roe's stories describe his country as it does that non-indigenous readers enjoy them.

To travel into the realms of written literature, the narratives depend on Muecke's response (and subsequent transcription); it is therefore important for Roe that Muecke understands him and that he performs his own role as a listener.

One touching moment comes to mind from the story **Worawora Woman** – a trustori about a married man who goes hunting with a greedy woman – in which Roe pauses the narration to find out if Muecke is uncomfortable about their friend, Butcher Joe, lighting up a cigarette. Roe continues only once Muecke has said, "Oh that's all right".

That's not to say that Gularabulu is all about talking to a white audience. As I've **written elsewhere**, often Roe threads his stories with words and phrases that are left unexplained and mysterious to those unfamiliar with Nyigina language or culture.

During his telling of **Djaringgalong** – a tale from bugaregara about a monster bird who ate people's babies – Roe laughs and says to one of his countrymen, "binabinaba", the meaning of which is never explained.



Austronesian Expeditions

And a large chunk of one of one of Roe's nurlu, or songpoems, is included in the book's opening story, **Mirdinan**, with only a very basic gloss. By repeating these fragments of stories or songs, older patterns of tradition are imprinted on contemporary texts.

Roe's voice is, therefore, an example of what scholars Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra have called an "Aboriginal Polyphony". Rather than a text which represents a "pure" Aboriginality, Gularabulu is a "**composite and federalist**" literature that crosses a number of genres and can operate in

many different cultural contexts.

Indeed, Hodge and Mishra remind us that a link to oral modes is a sign of exceptionally high status within Western literary culture. Roe's stories exploit this link: like his stories, the most famous members of the Western canon show the marks of their oral origins (**retarded narratives, prolepsis, bricolage, dialogue**).

Muecke's innovative typography does not eliminate or disregard the features of Roe's speech, either, but translates them into minimalist arrangements familiar to readers of Western avant-garde poetry. Muecke's system produces written marks not only for Roe's narration, but also for his growls, hesitations and other pauses.

If we read the language as poetic, Muecke says in his introduction, we pay attention not only to its "underlying content", but also to its very form. After all, Roe's stories are much more than spoken language: he growls, sings, rasps a boomerang, draws pictures in the dirt, or members of his audience will interject and contribute to the story.

To understand this book's real importance, suggest Hodge and Mishra, we might consider that Gularabulu consists "of a set of genres which will not all correspond exactly to any equivalent in English". Reading Gularabulu is to verge on an experience of watching or listening; it is to be following Paddy Roe through his country while also aware that there's plenty you can't see or comprehend.

To read this book is to be always moving somewhere else, away from the confines of Western literature, of settlement, and of the edifice of colonial thought.

***Are you an academic or researcher? Is there an Australian book or piece of writing – fiction or non-fiction, contemporary or historical – you would like to make the case for? Contact the [Arts + Culture editor](#) with your idea.***

**Further reading:**

**[The case for The Fortunes of Richard Mahony by Henry Handel Richardson](#)**

**[The case for Kim Scott's That Deadman Dance](#)**

**[The Case for John Bryson's Evil Angels](#)**

**[The case for Henry Handel Richardson's The Getting of](#)**