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Ballads behind the bars: poetry from jail



What do men serving jail time write about when given the chance?

After spending four days at Junee Correctional Centre during NAIDOC Week last year, Aunty Barbara Nicholson says there are three common themes inmates expressed in their poetry.

"I can't wait to get out and get home to family," Nicholson says is the most recurring theme. "And regret - why do I keep doing this to myself? "And the third one is about how they've resolved to change. "There's a lot of compassion in the work, and longing. But not a lot of anger, as people would expect."

Nicholson joined fellow writers Simon Luckhurst, John Muk Muk Burke and Bruce Pascoe to help about 20 inmates write poems for a collection titled *Dreaming Inside*.

Dreaming Inside will be launched at Celebrating the Voice Indigenous Writers' Night, in collaboration with the South Coast Writers Centre. The event is also in partnership with this year's Sydney Writers' Festival.

Nicholson, a Wadi Wadi elder, has authored works from poetry to academic writing. Her work includes lecturing at university and guiding Illawarra teachers in designing curriculums more applicable to indigenous students.

Her attention turned to Junee during the 2010 Write Around the Murray Festival, where she was part of a group that visited Junee Correctional Centre for a day to work with inmates.

Nicholson always had the idea of returning to work with the inmates and was surprised and excited last year to learn that the group was granted a four-day visit.

"I still had the feeling of wanting to give something back," Nicholson says of the 2010 visit.

"We always had the idea of going back there again."

Nicholson says the inmates were formed into groups between the four writers to initially work on paintings to express themselves.

Even those who were reluctant to write anything soon realised the painting itself was telling a story. Poetry was a popular choice among the genres offered to work with.

"I said 'tell me about the painting'," Nicholson says of the process of getting inmates to write.

"And then they'd start writing. For lads inside, it's [poetry] a very easy way of expression. It's about connecting art into stories."

Nicholson admits working with inmates, who ranged in age from 20-50, can be challenging.

"It can be pretty scary at times, but it's rewarding," she says.

"Would I do it again? In a heartbeat."

"You look at some of them and you think, 'why are you here?'"

Nicholson says the South Coast Writers Centre has held an Indigenous Writers' Night that coincides around Sorry Day and Reconciliation Week in May each year and saw the Junee project as an ideal way to showcase indigenous work during the festival.

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