Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2309083

Reed-Gilbert, Kerry

(1956 - 2019)

Born	19561024, Wiradjuri Country (Gulgong) New South Wales Australia
Died	20190713, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Activist, Artist, Consultant, Educator, Writer

Summary

Kerry Reed-Gilbert was an Aboriginal author, editor, educator and activist. A number of books of her poetry were published in her lifetime. She also compiled and contributed to numerous anthologies, and produced non-fiction related to her work as an educator and consultant. Her memoir, The Cherry Picker's Daughter was published in 2019, shortly after her death. Her friend and fellow Wiradjuri writer, Jeanine Leane described her as 'the matriarch of First Nations' Writing in Australia'.

Kerry Reed-Gilbert was inscribed on the ACT Women's Honour Roll in 2019.

Details

“Kerry grew up on Wiradjuri country, living in Condobolin NSW, raised within a large extended family by her Mummy and Daddy – Joyce and Ned Hutchings. As she grew up, she came to know the troubled story of her biological parents. Kerry was only three months old when her father, Kevin Gilbert, killed her mother, Goma (nee Scott) in Parkes NSW in 1957. Kerry and her older brother (also called Kevin) were then taken in by their father’s older sister Joyce, and Joyce’s husband Ned. In her writing and in interviews, Kerry always refers to them as Mummy and Daddy. In addition to Kerry and her brother Kevin, Joyce Hutchings cared for her own three children, and three children of other family members. The Cherry Picker’s Daughter describes Kerry’s hard and precarious childhood. While being raised by Joyce in a loving home, Kerry and Kevin were officially wards of the state, and lived in constant fear of the ‘welfare’. The family were subject to covert and overt racism. Public policies and attitudes of the time meant that access to fairly paid work, adequate housing, and educational opportunities were severely limited. Most of their income came from working as itinerant fruit-pickers (for which they were paid significantly less than non-Aboriginal workers), and from Ned Hutchings’s work as a railway fettler, which often kept him away from home. Joyce Hutchings also took on other work like domestic cleaning, cooking, stick-picking and timber-cutting to keep the family afloat. When their home in Condobolin was destroyed by fire, they endured the uncertainty of temporary and makeshift accommodation for some time, until Joyce was able to buy a house in Koorawatha. Although The Cherry Picker’s Daughter is described by the publishers as a childhood memoir, it is also Joyce Hutching’s story, and a tribute to her resilience and dedication to her family.

In 1971 when Kerry was 15, her father was released from jail, and he continued pursuing the activism, art and writing that he had taken up while in prison. Kerry frequently acknowledged that despite the difficulties of her childhood, she was luckier than many other Aboriginal children of the time, as Joyce was able to achieve what many others could not, and keep her family together. Kerry said ‘I’ve got all the goodness of this amazing family. I’ve got all the principles of this amazing Aboriginal woman – her strength, her dignity…[and] I got the fire in the belly of my old man’. After leaving school Kerry worked as a fruit-picker and became a mother to two daughters. In the late 1980s she lived in Wagga Wagga and pursued further study. Initially undertaking an Associate Diploma in Adult Education, she later completed a Bachelor of Arts in Adult Education. While studying she also worked in women’s housing, employment services and literacy programs in Wagga. She attended the 1988 Aboriginal protest at the Tent Embassy with her father in Canberra, this event fuelled her involvement in activism and calls for Aboriginal sovereignty through a treaty.

In the 1990s she moved to Sydney and commenced working at the Office of Youth Affairs and established Indigenous employment programs with Telstra. She later started her own business Kuracca Consultancy, providing training in Aboriginal culture and history to government and community organisations, and consultancy services supporting research and evaluation related to Indigenous health, education, homelessness and other social issues. While working to advance human rights and social and educational opportunities for Aboriginal people, Kerry also found time for creative output. She practiced art and photography and had started sharing her poetry, supported by her close friend Anita Heiss. In 1993 she performed some of her poems at Writers in the Park at the Harold Park Hotel and in 1996 Black Woman, Black Life, the first collection of her poetry, was published. In 1997 she compiled and edited Message Stick: Contemporary Aboriginal Writing. In 2000 she also compiled and edited The Strength of Us as Women: Black Women Speak, which she described in the preface as an outlet for Aboriginal women to describe ‘their issues, their loves, their hurts’. In an ABC radio interview, she spoke about her hope that Indigenous women’s writing would flourish and not just be confined to autobiography and survival stories but might expand into other genres; asking ‘why can’t we write erotica…or murder mysteries?’.

Kerry moved to Canberra in the late 1990s, to be closer to her youngest daughter and grandchild, and brought her eldest daughter and her children to live there too. Canberra also allowed for improved work opportunities. She was a founding member of Us Mob Writing, a Canberra-based group of emerging and established Indigenous writers. In 2012–13 she co-founded the First Nations Australia Writers Network (FNAWN) and became its inaugural chairperson. The last few years of her life were very productive, despite ill health. Publications she was involved with included A pocketful of leadership in the ACT (2016); Too deadly: our voice, our way, our business. Us Mob Writing (2017) and A pocketful of leadership in First Nations Australia Communities (2017).

In 2016 the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) acquired an extensive collection of ‘Aboriginalia’ that Kerry had begun accumulating in the 1970s. The collection includes plates, figurines, badges, ashtrays, prints, and velvet paintings. Responding to criticism that such material demeans Aboriginal people, she said ‘We are masters of our own destiny and we will decide what we see as being culturally right for us. I believe these objects represent who we are as people, from then to now. Each piece represents Aboriginal Australia and we will own them.’

Kerry Reed-Gilbert received a number of awards for her writing and has been acknowledged as a generous mentor and supporter by many other contemporary Indigenous writers. In 2003 she was the recipient of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board fellowship for poetry and writing, which provided a two-month residency in New York. Her name was inscribed on the ACT Women’s Honour Roll in 2019. Through her writing and public speaking, she advocated against tokenism, for Indigenous people to be paid fairly for their contributions to public cultural activities and events, and for non-Indigenous writers to be more thoughtful in their portrayal of Aboriginal characters in their writing. She also challenged non-Indigenous Australians to engage with and acknowledge the history of colonisation and dispossession, and its ongoing impact on Aboriginal people. She passed away in Canberra in July 2019 surrounded by her daughters, grandchildren, other family and close friends.”

Published resources

Kerry Reed-Gilbert: her eulogy from my heart (Anita Heiss blog),
https://anitaheiss.wordpress.com/2019/07/31/kerry-reed-gilbert-her-eulogy-from-my-heart/

Vale Kuracca: a tribute to Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Jeanine Leane,
https://overland.org.au/2019/08/vale-kuracca-a-tribute-to-kerry-reed-gilbert/

Honouring the Words of the Messenger, 2000,
https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/speakingout/kerry-reed-gilbert/11326982

Desperate Measures: Kevin Gilbert with Kerry Reed-Gilbert, 2014,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIMQ49tmcDo

Archival resources

Kerry Reed-Gilbert interviewed by Mary Hutchison in the Centenary of Canberra oral history project (2014)

AIATSIS collection

Author Details
Kylie Scroope

Created 20 April 2023
Last modified