

Story(telling)

THOM VAN DOOREN
University of Sydney / University of Oslo

Debbie taught me about stories. I was lucky enough to have her as my PhD supervisor, and then as a collaborator and friend. Over the fifteen years that we worked together, she slowly, sometimes painfully, taught me to tell stories. At the same time, she taught me that stories are more than a mode of expression, they are a means of understanding, of thinking, of attending, of relating, and so a profoundly important opening into responsibility.

I'm not sure how it was that Debbie came to appreciate stories in the way that she did. She spent a lot of her life learning from Indigenous teachers in the communities of Yarralin and Lingarra in the Northern Territory, and much of the wisdom that they shared with her came in the form of stories: like dingo and the moon, the parable of the man who shot dogs, and the saga of Captain Cook (*Wild*; 'Saga') These stories clearly affected her, and she continued to return to and work with them for the rest of her life. As she put it in an interview that I did with her a few months before her death:

When I go back to my notebooks, or to stories that I've told in one context that I want to return to in another context, they just keep *unfolding*. It hasn't reached bottom; it never would reach bottom—there just isn't a bottom. ('Interview')

I suspect that it was also through these relationships with Indigenous teachers that Debbie became attuned to the more-than-human world as *itself* a richly populated web of stories. Her work often engaged with the need to learn to better hear these stories, but also with the important consequences that flow from appreciating that not all meaning is intended for, or indeed intelligible to, us. As she put it: 'Where one person's or species' knowledge stops, someone else's knowledge picks up the story' ('Val' 104).

Over the years Debbie and I often talked, and sometimes wrote together, about stories and storytelling. She often emphasised the power of stories as accessible, memorable, engaging, and compelling modes of communication that, when told well, can hold within themselves multiplicity, complexity, connectivity ('Slowly', also see Griffiths).

When I started my first full time academic teaching position, I sat down with Debbie to get her advice. Much of that conversation was about storytelling. I don't think I've given an undergraduate lecture since that didn't begin with a story as a way of drawing the class into the topic, into the history, the stakes. It was at the same time that I stopped writing articles that didn't begin with, and indeed work largely through, a narrative frame. This change was in part driven by a desire to be accessible and engaging, but more than this it was a result of the realisation, through practice, that *responsible* thinking is inseparable from storytelling, inescapably caught up in the particular (also see Cheney and Weston 130).

This is, I think, the most important thing that I learnt about stories from Debbie. Namely, that storytelling is always an ethical work. Stories are about forging relationships, about learning to see and understand, and as a result about being drawn into new obligations and responsibilities. There are no abstract ethical “systems” here, instead, as Debbie put it: “Stories themselves have the potential to promote understandings of embodied, relational, contingent ethics,” to ‘pull readers into ethical proximity’ (‘Slowly’). Through the slow, careful, work of paying attention to the world—in our own or others’ stories—we come to understand, to be connected, to be redone, in ways that just might enable better possibilities for life. Stories have life and death consequences. It is for this reason that in our shared work we talked about ‘storying’, as a verb, as a way of *doing* the world (van Dooren and Rose ‘Lively’).

But Debbie also knew that the power of stories is very far from absolute. She argued that even if there is only death, even if nothing is to be gained through ‘writing into the great unmaking’, there is often still an obligation to take up this work (‘Slowly’ 8). This is a conviction that we shared, one that we discussed when we studied together to be funeral celebrants: laying the dead to rest *well* is important work. Debbie insisted that storytelling in the mode of witnessing, did this kind of work: it was ultimately about the refusal to turn away from suffering, from violence, from injustice, an act of ‘keeping faith’ (van Dooren and Rose ‘Keeping’ 377). To refuse to turn away, she argued, was ‘to remain true to the lives within which ours are entangled, whether or not we can accomplish great change’ (‘Slowly’ 9).

The written work that Debbie left behind is full of insights, all of which were profoundly dialogical, formed in conversation with her Indigenous teachers, with philosophers, with dingoes, flying-foxes, and others. While I will continue to be grateful for them all, foremost amongst these insights for me is the way in which Debbie taught me to appreciate storied modes of understanding, living, and relating.

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