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HD **Indigenous book a text for the nation**
BY Michael Lund
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WHEN **Bruce Pascoe** looks to the stars on a clear night he is seeing a very different sky to that of his childhood.

The European constellation names are giving way to a night sky described in a very different way for thousands of years by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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Orion the Hunter, seen in northern-hemisphere skies, had already been turned on his head by early Europeans in Australia, his belt and sword now known to many as the Saucepan.

"The Saucepan is such a prosaic image that's so telling, to transfer Orion into a pot," Pascoe laughs.

"Yet Aboriginal people had this whole other great story for it."

The story of Utimal and Usal's place in the night sky as punishment by Tagai is just one of many tales revealed in Pascoe's *The Little Red Yellow Black Book*.

Described as an introduction to indigenous Australia, the book is a revised and expanded version of *The Little Red, Yellow & Black (and Green and Blue and White Book)* first published in 1994, originally written by Bill Jonas and Marcia Langton.

The 140 colour pages tell Australia's history from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective.

"Australian children should not learn that James Cook 'discovered' Australia," it says on page 69. "After all, we knew we were already here!"

"And the story is much more interesting and exciting than that. Cook was an incredible sailor, among the best of all time, but the Macassans, Portuguese and others came to Australia before him."

The idea for an update came from Pascoe's attempts to find out more about his own family history.

Born in Victoria in 1947 of Bunurong and Cornish heritage, he admits he benefited from the traditional Australian education system.

"I got educated thanks to Sir Robert Menzies, whose government was very very keen on education for Australians," he says.

“Both my sister and myself were educated at a time when our family fortunes wouldn't have allowed us to be, so we are eternally grateful for that Liberal government.”

A successful author, teacher and expert on Aboriginal languages, Pascoe says his traditional education left him with little knowledge of his own Aboriginal heritage.

“I was forced into learning a history about my country that I didn't know simply because when I went in search of my family, I discovered all this stuff about my country that was a mystery to me,” he says.

Part of the book focuses on the appalling treatment of indigenous people at the hands of the British and, later, Australian governments.

After more than 200 years of European involvement in Australia, Pascoe says people are now recognising they have much to learn from 60,000 years of Aboriginal history on the land.

“We are in trauma at the moment because it's not raining in the country and we don't understand how to react,” he says.

“We've probably farmed the country badly because we've tried to treat it like the European field and it's not, our soils are incredibly thin and probably the least rich soil in the world.”

Pascoe says research into indigenous farming practices is now revealing that Aborigines had a far better understanding of how to cope with Australia's harsh climate.

“What they're doing now is looking at the grains that Aboriginal people did harvest and finding out that they were basically drought resistant and many of them were gluten free,” he says.

“Now these things are going to be very important for our country because they grow easily, they'll grow on sand some of them.”

The Little Red Yellow Black Book explores other areas where indigenous Australians have made a valuable contribution to the defence force, politics, music, art, cinema and especially sport.

The book also explains some of the custom, culture and rituals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people which is why Pascoe has been learning a new appreciation for the night sky, uncovering traditional tales from across Australia.

“Those stories are there and we're yet to learn all of them,” he says.

“All cultures do this right around the world, they try and explain the world to themselves and their position in it, and we do it through the sky.”

Pascoe believes a book on indigenous history will appeal to fellow indigenous Australians.

“I know Aboriginal people will buy it because many Aboriginal people suffer the same educational system as Australian children do, and so many of our own people are ignorant of their culture,” he says.

But he also senses many Australians are now keen to learn more about indigenous history and culture, especially since the apology delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and the documentary series First Australians.

Pascoe was involved with the SBS series now screening on Sunday evenings. “I'm getting phone calls from people who have watched First Australians,” he says.

“These are educated people -- university graduates twice over -- saying ‘I didn't realise that had happened in my country’.

“Well that means that our education system has failed us.”

That's why he hopes the book will be adopted by schools and by any government or organisation looking to better understand indigenous Australians and their rich culture.

“I'm hoping that the sort of people who will be buying the book want to discover some very interesting things about their own country,” he says.

“I hope it will be a standard text for the country.”

The Little Red Yellow Black Book:

brucepascoe.com.au; lryb.aiatsis.gov.au

First Australians:

www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians/

The Little Red Yellow

Black Book

Bruce Pascoe

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