

Lillian Holt

Every now and again, somebody arrives in town to lift my flagging spirits.

In this case, it was Germaine Greer. I went to see her at the *Quarterly Essay* launch where she talked about her ideas on black/white relations in this country.

As I listened to her, I was buoyed, bowled over, by her boldness. In a country which treads cautiously in case anybody gets upset about the issues – especially whitefellas – I wanted to clap every word she uttered.

Immediately, I went up to her after her speech and said, “You know, Germaine, I’d walk a million miles to hear a whitefella like yourself say what you said here just now. I’ve been trying to teach about Whiteness for ages. That is, to get whitefellas to look at themselves and not keep researching, studying and labelling us anymore.”

But caution: Don’t ask me exactly what she said to prompt my response. Don’t ask me exactly what she wrote. All I know is that it resonated with me. It gave me hope. It replenished my spirit. It spoke to my condition and that of this country. It inspired and fired me up.

Next day, I heard and saw her being interviewed on TV and radio. The interviewers wanted to know what she meant exactly by an Australian Aboriginal Republic. To which she replied: “I don’t know.”

Don’t know! Now what kind of answer is that, Germaine, in a country where everyone knows about or at least has an opinion on the original inhabitants? There was dead silence and astonishment on the part of the interviewers. Followed by nervous laughter with a faltering “but you’re the one suggesting it!”

“Yes,” said Germaine. “I just want to put it out there for people to think about it.”

Pregnant pause on part of interviewer. Then move on to next question.

I thought to myself, Good on you, Germaine – finally a whitefella who can admit to “not knowing”. In this quantitative, measured, controlled society we live in, where one is expected “to know” at all times, at all costs, where there

are so many “experts” on Aborigines, it’s refreshing to hear such an august and audacious academic say, “I don’t know.”

I hadn’t heard whitefellas talking like this for a long time. And my spirit was in sore need of succour. The last time I got such a hit of hope was from Jane Elliott in 1997 just after a rather nasal-voiced, mean-spirited, suburban redhead from Ipswich emerged.

Thank God there are such people as Jane and Germaine who will say such things. Provoke. Confront the complacency. It has to come from them. It can’t come from us mob because we get labelled as “carping boongs or whingeing blackfellas” if we as much as confront/criticise this rich and abundant but racialised country in which we live.

It has to come from the power and privilege of Whiteness which both women both inhabit, daily.

Germaine Greer picked up lots of “brownie points” (no pun intended) from me and my fellow blackfella mate Gary Thomas. We were the only two Aboriginal people present at the launch.

I said to him as we left, “What did you think of Germaine Greer?”

Without hesitation, he said, “I really liked her because she is not afraid to dream ... and to dream big, Lill.”

What an accolade from an Aborigine!

And, yes, I agree!

We need to dream, dream big, dream this country into full existence.

And, like Germaine, don’t ask me exactly what I mean by that. Just go away and think about it!

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