



Anita Fleiss

The Single, Divorcee, and Widowed

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anita heiss takes indigenous writing to an international stage

Indigenous author, poet, satirist and social commentator, Dr Anita Heiss, recently travelled to the 2009 Black Writers Reunion and Conference (BWRC) in Las Vegas. Her attendance at the conference was supported by the Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education at the University of Western Sydney, where she serves as an Adjunct Associate Professor.

Last year, Anita gave the keynote address on 'Black Words: the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers and Storytellers Research Community', and this year, ran workshops on 'Getting the Creative Juices Flowing' and 'Writing Your Memoirs'.

The conference was attended by over 100 writers who made their way from major cities and country towns all over North America to participate in workshops on all forms of writing and publishing.

"There is a real mix of people there – some very high profile black writers, and also people who have written numerous manuscripts and are still seeking publication, but what I found interesting was that everyone was incredibly serious about the craft," Anita says.

While she found many similarities in the content of Black American writing compared with Indigenous Australian writing, with stories of oppression, segregation and survival, she also observed a common sense of humour.

As well as attending writing workshops herself, Anita established contact with US agents and others involved in writing centres, which may lead to further teaching opportunities.

At the same time, Anita says, she was also able to "spruik UWS in terms of Indigenous education, so it also puts UWS on the map in an international context".

Anita's association with UWS began when she undertook her doctorate, specialising in communication media. She was the first Indigenous PhD graduate from UWS, writing a thesis on Aboriginal literature and publishing with a comparative study on literature and publishing in the Maori and Canadian Native American cultures.

"That in itself has allowed me to do an awful lot of travelling and public speaking as there is an increase in interest in Indigenous issues and culture in Australia," Anita says, adding that she was extremely well supported at UWS by the college during her degree.

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Since then, she has maintained her link with UWS through giving guest lectures, and recently took up the role of Adjunct Associate Professor at the Badanami Centre, which she sees as a way to be involved in advising on the future of Indigenous education at UWS.

"I also see it as a means of raising the profile of the institution, and hopefully I'll be a role model for other Indigenous students who will see UWS as a viable place for them to do their further studies," Anita says.

Anita now splits her time between roles that allow her either to write or to promote Indigenous literature – a glimpse at her jam-packed schedule over the coming month includes time as a visiting writing fellow, giving lectures, working on a novel with students at La Perouse Public School, work as an Indigenous Literacy Ambassador, visits to WA writing festivals, a trip to Spain to give a keynote address on the AustLit – Black Words Research Community, and time in Paris to research her new novel, *Paris Dreaming*.

Gaining a higher degree has been a key part of Anita's success, and she strongly encourages other Indigenous students to take this path.

"The best advice I can give is to say that for me, professionally and personally, the best thing that I have ever done was to enrol in the PhD at UWS, because it has opened so many doors. As elitist as it sounds, there are conversations I can have at nearly any level of the University because I have the title. It's clearly not a fair way or an equitable way to be, but it's the reality of it.

"The reality is you're more employable. It is far more competitive to get any kind of job these days, but if you want to have self-determination for Indigenous people in Australia, you have to be self-determining individuals first. Having tertiary education is a form of gaining self-determination and having a real say in how we live every day as individuals, and we can carry that into our broader workplaces."