

Chris Sitka (Napaltjarri)

**Morgan's Mutant Fantasy: A
critique of Marlo Morgan's book
*Mutant Message Down Under***

Shortly after I arrived in the United States from Australia friends started asking me “What do you think of the book *Mutant Message Downunder?*” As this book is virtually unknown in Australia I decided to read it in order to give them an opinion. It soon became obvious why it is not a hit in Australia. Only people totally unfamiliar with Australia and the culture of its indigenous people would be taken in by the claim that this fantasy is reality.

Marlo Morgan, the author, claims that this book is a documentation of her experience with a tribe of Australian Aboriginals who chose her to carry a message of great importance to the world. She describes a journey of several months across the Australian continent in which she is taught Aboriginal cultural secrets. I am told she now gives well attended workshops teaching the insights she says they asked her to convey.

In one part of the book she is buried up to her neck in the sand to be cleansed of toxins. The fans of this book have the opposite problem. They have their heads buried in the sand. A large number of people are reading this book and have faith that its message is authentic. That is why I believe it is important for me to point out that this book a ridiculous fabrication.

I am a white Australian of European descent. I do not have any Aboriginal blood in me. I have worked for and with Australian Aboriginals, including traditional elders. I do not claim to have been initiated or told any secrets of clan lore. I have learned much from them and from studying writings about their culture for over twenty five years. I have been given a ‘skin’ name by women elders of the Western Desert Kukatja language group. This is necessary for them to be able to relate to and work with me. I do not claim that it in any way makes me Aboriginal. However I do believe that it gives me certain obligations. I see exposing the grossly inaccurate portrayal of Australian Aboriginal desert culture in *Mutant Message* as one of those obligations.

The introduction to this volume, written by the author, is full of defensive claims about the authenticity of her story. No wonder. As an Australian who has spent some time walking out in the desert and relating to traditional Aboriginal people I found it hard to find any authenticity in the pages of this book. Revealingly, elsewhere in the introductory pages, it is described as a novel. However even novelists usually do research to make the setting of their story ring true.

A feature of this poorly written novel (claiming to be fact) is that no locations are described by name. Even the author’s pre-adventure stay in Australia’s large cities is enveloped in secrecy. We never learn whether she wooed her Robert Redford look-a-like beau in Sydney or Brisbane or Cairns. We can only guess. A difficult job because she describes a city with the world’s most beautiful natural harbour — presumably Sydney — where tropical cane toads abound. There are no

cane toads in Sydney so perhaps we should assume that Cairns has miraculously obtained a harbour for the benefit of this writer.

Marlo Morgan alludes to the fact that she was to spend five years in Australia but doesn't tell us how long she really was there. From her description of Australia I wonder if it was even a week. If indeed she was in Australia for a number of years, or even long enough to act out the events described in *Mutant Message* she must be very forgetful. It is more than suspicious that after describing in detail, from memory only, numerous conversations she had over four months with the nomad tribe she supposedly travelled with, the fact that you don't make phone calls with quarters in Australia slipped her memory. I wonder how come she forgot that in Australia we don't even have quarters as part of the currency.

Towards the end of her account Marlo describes walking out of the desert and meeting a man on the edge of a city who gives her a quarter. Maybe he happened to have one and was just humoring an obviously flaky American. However she does claim to have made a call from a phone box with it. Sorry Marlo but you would have needed two twenty cent pieces and even that would not have been enough for the long distance call you describe making. Then follows an even more surprising description of how the New Age Mutant Messenger found her way back to civilization to convey the great wisdom she alone is chosen to impart. She has money wired from her office to the telegraph company nearby. I understand that in the States there is such an institution as a telegraph company and a telegraph office where wayward wanderers can pick up cash. But Marlo was describing an unnamed Australian city. In the interests of a more authentic sequel let me tell you there is no such thing in any Australian city

Perhaps this is being picky. I could mention any number of inaccuracies like this such as the description of Australians liking warm beer (that's England, Australians like it icy) and mere spelling mistakes (Quantas for Qantas, Foster's Lauger for Lager) . Her descriptions of cutesy Australian scenarios and even the insulting sub-title downunder written upside down are designed to appeal to American readers' desire to see Australia as quaint and exotic. It would be just laughable to an Australian brought up on American Westerns and sit coms if it were not for the core 'message' of the book.

When I first picked up *Mutant Message* and flicked through it I was prepared to believe that Marlo Morgan had some kind of experience with some Aboriginal people and had kind of stretched the truth out in the interests of self promotion. However a close reading leaves me in no doubt that she did no such thing. Almost every detail is false. This is blatant cultural appropriation in the interests of profit. If the author is not an out and out cynical operator she is sadly deluded.

Her description of the tribe she crossed the deserts of Australia with bears little relation to any indigenous Australian people. She describes ornaments, musical

instruments, cooking utensils, ceremonies, landscape, social relations, clothing and much else which simply do not exist anywhere in the traditional cultures of the Australian continent. She does claim that her tribe is a special, less corrupt, more highly evolved group than your average run of the mill Australian Aboriginal. It is still curious that her description of their culture bears no resemblance what so ever to any Aboriginal traditions. Instead her tribe practice numerous Native American customs. I would be tempted to believe that this was the story of a Native American tribe lost in Australia if Marlo Morgan had not herself assured us that they are Aboriginal.

I could give you several dozen examples of this cultural inversion designed to make American readers feel at home. For example at one point she describes the women making an object that mystified me. It involved making a hoop and catching spider webs out of a tree. The origin of this one was revealed to me when I glanced through a New Age catalogue a couple of days after reading *Mutant Message*. Why, it was a Native American dream catcher!

Most notable in this Americanization is the names she ascribes to the desert tribe's members. Storyteller, Tool Maker, Sewing Master, Big Music, Secret Keeper. This was my first indication that this book was suspect. This kind of naming does not exist in Aboriginal culture. People have names, but they are not translatable in this way. Nor is there such a thing as a specialist Tool Maker. Everyone makes their own tools. Many of the functions described in her fanciful names don't even exist.

What's more people are rarely addressed by their personal names. People are commonly addressed by their 'skin' or kinship name. This term is shared by others of the same generation. The translation for Napaltjarri, my 'skin' name, is daughter-in-law to a Napanangka or grand daughter to a Napangarti. Even if there are six other Napaltjarris sitting within ten feet of me I am always addressed by that term. One's kinship is far more important than one's individuality. Even in language groups without strict 'skin' terms older people are called aunty or grandmother rather than their name.

Never once does Marlo refer to having been given a 'skin' name or of herself in kin relation to the people she claims to have spent several months with. A strong kinship system is the dominant feature of all Australian Aboriginal traditions. In numerous instances I have witnessed traditional Australians unable to speak to or fully acknowledge the presence of a person without a 'skin'. They avert their eyes and mumble incoherently if forced to speak to a white person. As soon as it becomes obvious this person will be around for a while, and must be related to, they are given a 'skin' name so that relaxed communication is possible. Anyone outside the kinship system is virtually non-existent. Given the boasting in the rest of her novel it would be surprising if Marlo forgot to mention having been

given a 'skin'. It is inconceivable that Aboriginal people would impart secrets to anyone without a 'skin'. Being given a name like *Mutant* is equally improbable. The concept of a mutation, a Western scientific term, is non-existent in Aboriginal culture.

I have to wonder if Marlo Morgan has ventured out into the Australian desert at all. She does accurately describe the thorny nature of walking in the desert barefoot. I too have pulled thorns from my feet – but I knew what kind of thorns they were. Marlo obviously does not. She describes in detail walking for months on spinifex grass. Walking on spinifex grass is virtually impossible. It grows in large clumps, quite widely spaced, with red sand in between. Walking in the desert consists of walking around and between tussocks of spinifex. Yet Marlo several times describes walking on it as its sharp barbs dig into her feet. She must have very long legs, or the word walking means jumping in her unique dictionary. Why spend months jumping from tussock to tussock to cut your feet? In the interests of a good story? Why describe spinifex as a sharp lawn when it looks nothing like that? Could it be because you don't really know what spinifex looks like?

Still Marlo is a woman of great stamina. I know no white people, including friends who have lived out in the desert for many years, who can walk all day in the summer sun without a hat. Almost every year someone, including numerous Aboriginal people, perish from trying to walk for help when their cars break down. The temperature range is understated in Marlo's account. Perhaps it was a particularly cool summer where the temperature did stay at 110 F. In any case, why did this group decide to walk from one side of Australia to the other in summer when the rest of their kin would have been resting in the shade of a desert oak?

People living a traditional nomadic lifestyle rarely travelled outside their territory. Occasionally they would do so to visit another kinship group and for ceremonial exchanges. Travelling in another group's territory could only be done with permission from that group and for ceremonial purposes. No family group would have travelled thousands of miles from their own country, meeting no-one and thereby transgressing traditional law and neglecting ritual obligations to their own land.

Here we get into dicey territory. In fact there are no more traditional nomads in Australia. If there were, then their survival skills would have to be finely honed because the ecology of the desert has been irrevocably altered by feral animals and plants introduced by the white invasion. The water table has been drastically lowered. Australia's desert Aboriginals have all been forced into settlements. It is vaguely possible that a group of 62 people as described in *Mutant Message* might have escaped detection and, unlike all their kin, avoided civilization. There was

a group of four people who came out of the desert in Kukatja country in 1984. They would have been almost as surprised to meet Marlo Morgan's clan as they were by what they saw at the white mission settlement.

They would be horrified to see the number of possessions lugged around by Marlo's clan. Desert nomads wore no clothes and carried very little with them. She describes them as wearing clothes, carrying sleeping skins, skin water bottles, musical instruments, cooking utensils and any amount of paraphernalia. Unlike other desert peoples they boiled up brews of tea and manufacture menstrual pads, etc. Strangely such activities reminded me more of specific descriptions I recently read in Jean Auel's *Valley of the Horses* (set in Stone Age Europe) than any Aboriginal nomads.

Marlo claims to have been taught many wisdoms by her guides. Yet she describes virtually none of the regular spiritual practices and day to day activities of actual desert people. Instead she inaccurately describes the meaning of concepts such as Songlines. (They are not a measure of distance.) Her people were not performing their ritual obligations. Instead of singing for the country they gave what Marlo describes as 'a concert'. Now I have seen an Aboriginal concert. It was organized by a white teacher at an ex-mission settlement. School kids sang European hymns translated into Pitjantjatjara and cowboy bootstockmen played Country and Western numbers on battered guitars. However a concert is a concept unheard of in traditional culture. People 'sing their country' in ancient chants accompanied by dance and sometimes sand drawings. Instead of experiencing and sharing with us her observations of such activities Marlo describes a very Western like concert for which her clan manufactures instruments never used in Australian traditions such as wind chimes and flutes. What's more they include in the concert a bullroarer which is a highly sacred instrument which women are forbidden to listen to. However it did appear in a Crocodile Dundee movie which may account for Marlo's familiarity with it. Likewise the percussive instrument of Australian peoples are the clapping sticks. They do not and did not use drums. Yet Marlo has them making drums.

This concert occurs in a gorge which, by its description, would undoubtedly be a sacred place necessitating a real ritual ceremony. Aboriginal people would compulsively recount the Dreamtime (mythological) significance of such a place, but this is not mentioned. Instead it is called "the medicine of music", again a Native American term. Her pals compose music for the occasion and walk away saying "Pretty great concert." and "Guess before to [sic] long I'll change my name to Great Composer." Such ego intrusive behaviour is patently laughable to anyone who has been around any real Aboriginals performing ceremony for country.

Of course this tribe even has a Western style therapist called Secret Keeper who listens to people's problems. Something for *Mutant Message's* fans to relate

to. In case they still feel lost there is a sky being called Divine Oneness. Once again something that none of the other Aboriginal clans in Australia, who have a strongly earth focused spirituality and no god like being, share with Marlo's crew. There are any amount of such White Western concepts put into Marlo's characters' mouths. One old woman says to her "I think you must come from outer space." Outer Space? Has she been watching T.V.? She also puts into their mouths western concepts of free will, time and creation myths which include Noah's flood. There are even Eastern mystical concepts like celibacy (not an Aboriginal aspiration).

Towards the end of the book Marlo says "I now have knowledge and understanding that is beyond anything I could have imagined for myself". To the contrary, I believe Marlo was fully capable of imagining every bit of it. Hardly any of the knowledge she describes in the book is anything like what I have heard come out of the mouths of traditional elders. It sounds much more like the personal philosophy of an American woman who is promoting the kind of pop psychology we have all read in numerous other New Agey publications over the last few years.

The words that come out of the mouths of the characters in this book are Marlo Morgan's words. They are not the way people living a traditional lifestyle express themselves. Even if Marlo did in fact talk to some desert people, which I seriously doubt, she can't have been listening to them. Anyway Aboriginals have an astute method of handling nosy people. They simply answer yes to every inappropriate question asked of them. This allows white people to remain secure in their own reality and deflects intrusion and hostility.

Natural healing seems to be one of Marlo's passions. She claims to have learnt much from her travels and describes some extraordinary experiences. She portrays her guides as being extremely healthy due to their natural lifestyle. So much so that Great Stone Hunter had to deliberately break his leg so that they could show Marlo how to heal it. Though there were and still are Aboriginal healers, such romanticization draws attention away from the real tragedy of Aboriginal Australia's third world living conditions. Why would these people impart their powerful secret healing methods to a white American when their own Aboriginal kin, contrary to Marlo's description of them, are dying young of a large number of preventable diseases. The health conditions of Australia's Aboriginal population is an international scandal. She doesn't even get it right when describing the White Australian health system. Claiming that Australia has socialized medicine "with harmony between medicine and natural practitioners." Sorry, not true. The Australian government is constantly banning use of herbs and homeopathy, etc. by allopathic doctors.

On another tack, Marlo also gets the social organization of Aboriginal people all wrong. She has a character called Tribal Elder who is the chief. Native Americans may have chiefs but indigenous Australians do not. He seems to be her primary instructor. This would be most unlikely. Aboriginal culture is very sex segregated, especially when it comes to sacred teachings. Men simply do not instruct women. From puberty all women are instructed in their ceremonial obligations by older women. Ritual life is strictly divided into women's business and men's business. Some ceremonies involve both women and men performing separate parts of the whole, but the instruction for a woman would happen in the women's camp. Not that any actual ceremonies are accurately described anywhere in this book. The powerful connection to land never comes across. There is no dancing, no singing, no sand drawings and no Dreamtime myths. Even tourists often get to see more than was described in this book.

The story of Marlo's 'initiation' is patently unbelievable. Firstly she claims she was chosen because she had set up a business to help a group of young urban Aboriginals find employment. Something she claims they could not have done without her. A snide bit of racism there, as numerous Aboriginal groups are setting up businesses in Australia. She claims that before she invented them in the 1990s white Australians had never thought of fly screens despite the prolific number of insects. That is why her business venture, which is never named or located, was such a run away success. The news for Marlo is that I had a fly screen on my bedroom window in the 1950s.

No matter. A tribe of desert nomads was so impressed with this achievement, despite their lack of windows, that they chose her, of all people, to be their messenger. Ignoring many others who have dedicatedly worked for them for many years and speak their languages and understand their culture to a far greater extent than Ms Morgan, who shortly before her initiation says; "I knew very little about any of the Aboriginal groups . . . I didn't know if they were a close knit race or if, like the American Indians, vast differences, including different languages, were common." (p.3) More to the point; why not chose an Aboriginal person. Despite a decidedly racist passage in the novel which describes even urban Aboriginals as illiterate and without ambition (p.33) there are many Aboriginal writers and teachers and workshop presenters. There is even an Aboriginal owned and run publishing house (Magabala Books) which publishes the real words of real Aboriginal people e.g. *Footprints Across Our Land* — just released.

Not to worry. Marlo was born with a deep psychic connection to the chief of a people with no chiefs. She is picked up and driven out to the desert and everyone is waiting, already painted up for a ceremony in her honor (in designs that resemble no others seen on Aboriginal people). She is robbed of all her

possessions, tested by weird Las Vegas like games and virtually kidnapped into the desert. All within a matter of hours.

Usually any real introduction to Aboriginal ceremonial culture takes a long time of building up trust. It demands patience. On arrival in an Aboriginal camp as a stranger it is quite likely that no-one will talk to you much for days or weeks or months. There is no such thing as fast track teaching in this timeless land.

It is even more unlikely that they would take a white person's clothes, expensive watch and rings, burn them and then lead her off into the desert against her will. White people are approached with great caution. Aboriginals in the desert still remember their people being shot and poisoned in mass slaughters, women being raped, fathers being dragged off in chains. In their own lifetimes. In the present they live with summary injustice. Disproportionate numbers of their people die in legal custody each year. They are locked up for swearing in front of a white person. It is unlikely they would risk the wrath of a white person. If Marlo had decided she did not want an enlightening desert adventure they would have been in big trouble.

Apart from the silly bits of this story there is a serious racist element to Marlo's fantastic tale.

She claims that Uluru (Ayer's Rock) is no longer a site of 'worship' and that no tribe but hers has any sacred ritual objects in existence. This is presumably to big note the special nature of her Real People, as she calls them. This is an insult and misrepresentation of the actual indigenous peoples of Australia who are performing traditional ceremonies and maintaining the sacred objects, songs, dances, designs and teachings against great odds. To purvey the lie that traditional culture is dead is to undermine their efforts to preserve their culture. To add injury to insult she makes statements like "Their population is declining by their own free will" and says they have decided to have no more children. Such untrue genocidal projections are a criminal assault against an ancient race struggling valiantly to survive under the dominance of a hostile white society which continues to find many ways to try to wipe them out.

Marlo Morgan, while including puerile fragments of sympathy, litters her book with racist terms and statements: phrases such as half-cast, half-breed, native, dark skinned natives, cannibals and the way the word tribe is misused.

She frequently describes the people as having animal like hooves. She shows little human respect for the people she claims to have taught her so much. She remains a very superior, arrogant White. Her ego appears unbounded. Until she came along the Real People had "never before . . . associated with a white person or even considered any kind of relationship with one."(p.40) The text is littered with little nuggets of self praise "My friends always remarked how self sufficient I was." (p.3)

Sometimes this reaches absurd heights such as in the introduction where she states, "This manuscript was a peaceful self published work which became controversial. Australia's top judicial body, the High Court, overturned the concept of "terra nullis," which falsely contended the continent was unoccupied by civilization when British colonists arrived in 1788." The assumption from these sentences is that her book influenced the High Court decision. I seriously doubt any one on the High Court has ever heard of her book. They have however heard of the countless Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who have fought for Aboriginal Land Rights over the decades and demonstrated and spent large sums for the legal struggle. All of this effort counts for nothing apparently because it was Marlo Morgan who brought the High Court and the Australian people to enlightenment.

Despite this claim, I know no-one in Australia who has even read her book. She would have to have real gumption to distribute it in Australia. I am not the only one who might notice the inaccuracies and inconsistencies. I can imagine the outrage with which Aboriginal people would greet this book. The few accurate facts scattered sparingly amongst the rubbish in this volume were gleaned from reading books published in Australia. I could almost show you the pages they are taken from. There are several volumes describing bush foods and medicines, for example.

Even though I accept that not many people in the United States are qualified to pick its faults I am surprised that they can take this book seriously. The writing is painfully bad. Anyone who has to use large blocks of capital letters to get her point across is an amateur and the self-serving egoism of the author is transparent. Perhaps her readers are drawn to the romantic notion of being taken in by a people still in touch with their ancient spirituality. Such surrogate experiences are very trendy and profitable at the moment. Yet the insights served up are hardly nourishing or original; e.g. "All life is one." or "Mutants no longer have the good digestive system of the Real People." (p.132) Wow. It is a very poor substitute for the profound spirituality of real, existent Aboriginal culture.

I could go on criticizing this book for days. There is barely a page not full of suitable targets. Suffice to say that I urge you to discourage fellow Americans from taking it seriously. This is blatant cultural theft for self promotion and profit. It would serve readers much better to make a study of the true wisdom and insights available from traditional Australian Aboriginal culture which require respect and patience, not voracious greed and speed. Better still, a study of their own culture will lead White seekers to realise that devotion to profit and ego lead to unethical behaviour.

In conclusion; Marlo Morgan, you owe the Aboriginal peoples of Australia a big apology accompanied by the donation of all your considerable income from this venture to the cause of Aboriginal health and Land Rights.

NB In 1996 a group of Aboriginal elders, incensed by this book and the damage it is doing, obtained a government grant to travel to the United States to confront Marlo Morgan and to stop a Hollywood film being made of it. They obtained a very reluctant apology from her which I heard on radio in Australia. As they represented the people of the area in which she claimed to have begun her walk across Australia she had no choice but to admit she had made the whole story up.

Unfortunately this admission has gained almost no publicity in the States. For those who still listen to Morgan's message please remember it is the simply the musings of a white woman who has been fully prepared to lie and delude her admiring public.

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