

Land, Grief, and Returning to Dust: An Interview with Dani Powell

Samuel J. Cox



Samuel J. Cox. A lone eucalypt clinging onto red rock atop Kings Canyon (Watarrka National Park).

In November of 2021, I journeyed to central Australia in search of personal experience and a greater understanding of the unique, arid environments and spaces of the region. With it raining in the more remote locations I planned to visit for a time, I spent a week in Mparntwe, Alice Springs staying with my cousin and resolved to explore the literary landscape. Dust being a thematic feature of my PhD research, someone had shared Dani Powell's [*Return to Dust* \(2020\)](#) with me and I had read it on the road to Alice. Knowing that Dani lived locally, I was determined to contact her.

The search began at the finest Australian bookstore I am yet to come across, Red Kangaroo Books. The bookseller was familiar with Dani and told me that her novel had taken a long time to come to realisation. I am discovering that good books always do.

Return to Dust is the story of Amber, upon her return to the desert, in the aftermath of her brother's death. Her hope is to move on from her grief, to begin again. But as she embarks upon a road trip to a series of remote communities, her composure is soon undone by a number of encounters, observations, by the country itself. *Return to Dust* paints a vivid portrait of central Australia and its people. It is a story about grief and mourning, and recalibration.

Dani Powell grew up in Meanjin/Brisbane and has lived in Mparntwe/Alice Springs for the past 22 years. Her writing has been published in literary journals and anthologies and her location-based performances have been produced in and around Mparntwe/Alice Springs, as well as for ABC's Radio National. Dani won the Poetry Prize in the NT Literary Awards in 2009. She has directed the NT Writers Festival in Mparntwe since 2015. *Return to Dust* is her debut novel. It recently won the Best Fiction Prize in the Chief Minister's NT Book Awards.

I reached out to Dani and we resolved to meet for a coffee at 8CCC Café. What followed was a delightful conversation, ranging broadly across her writing, my research, the broader literary and environmental landscape, and more specific topics such as buffel grass, the elusive night parrot, and dust. We resolved to keep in contact and look to conduct an interview at some point in the future, for which *The Salty's* call for submissions for an issue with the theme of 'Land' emerged as the perfect opportunity. *This interview has been edited and condensed for Saltbush publication.*

Samuel J. Cox: *Land* features prominently in your novel *Return to Dust*. In *Alice Springs* it very much protrudes into the town, the ranges seem to envelope it. Can you speak to how you think and try to write about land — for example, as an environment or ecology, a place of meaning, a source of creativity — and how it influences you?

Dani Powell: That is such a good question. I didn't have a [preconceived] sense of how I would write about land, but I've always been kind of grappling with this question of 'land'. I think about land as a presence. It's almost an emotional thing and, as you come to write upon it, you draw upon all those things you mentioned, those disciplines and ways of seeing land

— as ecologies, as environment — to try and express the inexpressible. That inexpressible for me is this kind of presence.

I really love Robert Macfarlane’s writing. He wrote in *The Wild Places* ‘Woods, like other wild places, can kindle new ways of being or cognition in people, can urge their minds differently’ [98-99]. I loved the use of this word *urge*, which I found again in M. K. Turner’s book *Iwenhe Tyerrtye* — she’s a local senior Arrernte woman — and she talks about sadness intertwined with separation from land, saying: ‘If you’re sad or something, the Land just urges you, and brings you back and encourages you to go back. Because it’s got a sort of *touching* [...]’ [95]. I was just so moved by that sentence because it expresses something which all my writing is trying to express, although I don’t know if I’ve expressed it yet! [Laughs] But it is this thing — being urged or moved — and it has this impact on us in different ways that are very hard to articulate. So that is how I think about land.

I have lived here in central Australia for twenty years and have a really strong and intimate relationship with this particular place which I am trying to articulate in *Return to Dust*. As you say, in the writing I realised what it was about this place that I particularly love: this sense of land sort of looming greater than the town, this sense of presence that is undeniable, that may be deniable elsewhere because land has been transformed so much as to be unrecognisable as land. Here, there is no escaping that, so we feel the presence of that land and we are informed and impacted by that, and that also plays into the theme of the novel, the ephemeral nature of our lives. We are diminutive. We see our place in things more clearly and more honestly by that presence.

But yes, that is one aspect. I guess the other aspect is that it’s been highly politicised... land ownership and colonisation. These issues have always interested me, and not just about Australia, but about other places [too]. I’ve always read a lot about that as well.

Sam: *The landscapes of central Australia are so evocative and unique, and yet it is a region which seems to remain underrepresented in literature. Could you give your perspective?*

Dani: It’s really interesting that you say ‘underrepresented’. I think there is a really strong history of writing *about*, as well as *from* the Centre. There are a lot of people who come and write about and don’t necessarily live here, and they have contributed to the literature of here. Then there are people living here who are writing from the inside out, who are probably fewer. I think there has been far more representation in the genres of history, art, anthropology, and natural history — these genres are well represented. I’m also thinking of

books like *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* by Ted Strehlow, of Doris Blackwell, who wrote *Alice on the Line*. She was one of the early white settlers here, their family lived at the Telegraph Station. There is a lot of history, but those [titles] blend into memoir, which is starting to include more Indigenous authors as well, like Wenten Rubuntja, M. K. Turner, and Margaret Heffernan. In terms of people writing about their own personal story, you would also include Kim Mahood in that, and Rodd Moss whose book *The Hard Light of Day* is very much around the contemporary social life of Alice Springs in a way I'd never read before.

But in terms of writing about land and Country, the literature here often places it more as the backdrop, unless it's natural history or the history of this place. I was aware of inheriting that legacy or being part of that. I am also a settler so therefore I am a kind of traveller. And here, [I wondered], am I just coming to this place and describing it in a similar way [that] I imagine travel writers and people visiting have written about this place? Am I just going to do that? I guess I wanted to interrogate the 'I' a little more — who is the 'I' that is seeing this place or having this experience? I felt like I needed to make it personal. Whose perspective was actually writing about the land or the place? But I was less interested in my own story than themes, which is why I shifted from memoir to fiction.

In terms of fiction, there is not a lot of writing set here, and I'm really intrigued by this question of why. I think there are probably a lot of reasons. It was really hard, because of that history of writing about here in anthropology and natural history. There was almost a claim on the place by previous writing and it's very hard to write outside of that. Do you know what I mean?

Sam: *Yes, as in there are established ways to write about it?*

Dani: Yes, there are quite established ways to write and if you bring, say, environment into your writing there will be people scrutinising that closely. I was just aware there would be scrutiny around things, in terms of the facts. Which is fine, it's good. I'm interested in writing more truthfully, but it's very interesting where you are allowed to go and where you're not. Maybe here more so than elsewhere. And of course, land deeply connects with Indigenous story and culture as well, because that's very present here — so there are questions about whether writing 'on top of' you are in danger of writing over. And while this is the truth of everywhere, again, just like the land, here you can really see it and culture is very strong. So, it felt like you couldn't fictionalise 'over', so it became quite a difficult thing to try to write my own story which would be fictionalised for a number of reasons.

I wanted to people the landscape. I didn't want to write the landscape like a lot of white settlers have written 'landscape'. I wanted to make present the people that are in the landscape and part of the Country here.

Sam: *In terms of works from central Australia that have struck a chord that come to mind, most seem to be what we might call almost literary non-fiction, such as, for example, Tracks [by Robyn Davidson], Songlines [by Bruce Chatwin], which I think are great, but do they retain an element of travel or even traversal writing which says something about the way central Australia is, [or] can't be, conceptualised.*

Dani: It does connect to that question of people coming here and writing about this place. The anthropologist Michael Jackson is someone I read when I first came here. I just really like his writing — it's very poetic. As you say, it is that same perspective of the outsider, but the outsider can also bring a keen eye to things. But the insider — I think that's where Kim Mahood's work feels so fresh, because she grew up on a cattle station, but she has traversed away, moved away from that life, into this other life as an artist and writer. But she comes back and forwards, bringing new observations to her past, to that station life. But this is her home, very deeply.

I've lived a long time here by my own standards. [Laughs] Twenty years is a long time for me. But I'm not even first generation here, and I can love this place and I can talk about my connection but what's my responsibility for the place, how much responsibility am I taking on? That would separate me, potentially, from Indigenous people, maybe even from fourth generation [non-Indigenous] people who feel a sense of responsibility, and I'm trying to look at that in the book. You can come to know a place and come to know the communities, [but] you can't really conceive of what an Aboriginal person is talking about when they talk about their connection to a place.

There's a lot of poetry written here. Again, it's not as well known in that national literary scene. There are discussions around regional versus the cities. Writers who live in cities and urban areas are more highly profiled, there are greater opportunities. There's a whole lot of disparity there in terms of what actually gets published. I'm hoping that's changing — I'm hoping that even running the [NT Writer's] Festival in Alice Springs helps to change that because the model I've developed for the festival is to showcase NT writers alongside writers from elsewhere to bring them into dialogue.

Sam: *Could you speak to the connection between land and grief, which features so prominently in your novel, because it was not previously an obvious connection in my mind, yet it activates in a powerful way across the novel that makes it feel obvious?*

Dani: Your question actually reminds me of when I first lived here and I was working with young people as an Arts worker, doing creative writing work, et cetera, and I was exposed pretty fast to a lot of trauma and grief and violence. It was pretty overwhelming, to realise the lives some young people were living. I remember talking to my friend, who was a lawyer, and asking her how you manage this year after year, in your work — what we're now calling vicarious trauma, but it wasn't talked about here very much twenty years ago. And I remember her saying 'You just do your job. You try to do it the best you can, but some days you have your 'weeping days''.

And I can't remember if I said it then, or came to think it later, but when the river came down here, it sort of felt like the same thing she was talking about. That the harshness of people's lives and the poverty and the loss and inequity sort of builds and builds — and some people are of course, *living* this experience, others vicariously so, are troubled by it and trying to work out how to respond. And it's almost like, when the river comes down, the country is visibly crying, and this comes into my book. I try to talk about [how] everything just comes down the river, everything is exposed, you know, the dirty nappies and beer bottles. On one level there's the beauty of the river but at the same time all the trash and ugliness are just out there in the open. And it all comes down: it's like a 'weeping day'. But after that happens, there is a recalibration of a kind. The river settles the dust, and offers this possibility of recalibration. Of course, things don't necessarily get better, but they do get changed and do give relief [to] the land and the people, to everyone; there is a sort of rejuvenation.

Sam: *Kind of like an elemental force...*

Dani: That's right, and I guess it's cyclical too. These things in nature are cycles. Perhaps I started to understand grief like that as well. It goes through these cycles, which might be never ending. It might not ever become resolved, but each time it happens there is some sort of change or recalibration or movement forward.

Sam: *The title of your novel comes from Genesis, which is included as an epigraph. Could you explain why you chose that title?*

Dani: I couldn't get away from that title, it was just the obvious title. Because it seemed to hold so many things. It held the actual dust of the desert that we all live with and talk about and experience. It also references religion. In this book I'm exploring how religion (especially Catholicism, which was my experience), provides a world view or way of seeing — in this particular case — a way of seeing death.

At my book launch, I'd asked an Arrernte friend and senior woman, Amelia Turner, to welcome people at the start, and I'd given her my book. On the day I asked what she was going to do, and she said 'I'm just going to read this in Arrernte'. And I was wondering, what are you going to read in Arrernte? [Laughs] And of course, she was going to read the 'Genesis' in Arrernte. Of course, many Indigenous people have also experienced religion, including the Catholic religion, through the missionaries here. So, there is actually a lot of common understanding there.

Of course, this idea of dust and the return to dust is all about the ephemeral and death, which I was really wanting to explore in writing this book. At the start of the book, I'm talking about the crumbling nature of the town and everything in it. Everything you put out on the clothesline, everything you leave out by mistake is going to get broken down. And you see this — it's a physical, visceral experience of living here — including [in] yourself, seeing what happens to your skin, what happens to your hair, you get broken down. In a sense, you can see death in life, you can see this return to dust, not as a metaphor or as an abstract thing, but as a material thing.

But of course, there is a return in the narrative as well, returning to place. It just fitted so well. I know that passage by heart, growing up as a Catholic, I know a lot of Biblical phrases and words from hymns — and I didn't know that I knew them. In writing you're going into your subconscious and if you're honest and let things come out... I was quite interested in how many did come out. I didn't set out to explore that, but as I saw it rising in the writing, I thought, I have to look at that and how it influences my way of seeing and understanding life.

Sam: *Dust rises...* [Laughs]

Dani: [Laughs] But even if you're aware of seeing death all around you, it's still... When it comes, it cracks you open.

Sam: *There is also this powerful connection between dust and the past, but also the transfer of the past into the new. This is evident in people and things returning to dust, but it is also explained to your main character Amber, [who] travels to [an] Indigenous community and is with a group of women she knows, that when someone passes 'their house or camp is cleared out. Their name erased. In a sense their place is returned to space again. Returned to dust. Place becomes space again'" [128].*

Dani: There are offerings [from other cultures] of different ways to see things, which are helpful. Rather than being stuck, as in amber — the petrified amber — these different offerings help her to think differently about death or loss. That is how it was explained to me. You're sort of, you're not hovering around [laughs] in some sort of idea of heaven and watching over. It's just space again. Something new happens in that space. It's sort of an erasure, but not a negative erasure.

Sam: *Like a return...*

Dani: Which is kind of different. 'To dust you shall return' to me is you go back to the earth, you're part of the earth. Whereas the idea of heaven is almost like you don't die.

Sam: *You explain in your prologue that you have called your main character Amber as it is your favourite stone and you [also] describe that in Greek and Norse myths amber is the tears of the Gods, while lamenting the 'drying up' of our language of grief.*

Dani: In terms of it drying up, again, I have been thinking about Robert Macfarlane's writing in relation to an essay I'm writing. He wrote a children's book called *The Lost Words* which was all about reinstating words for nature that had been dropped from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* in 2007; words that were taken away, with the thinking that they weren't used anymore, which is, of course, self-perpetuating. But he talks about how, if you lose the word, for say, a river, you lose all the meanings that surround river. You lose what it is to sit by a river and all meaning and metaphor associated with that. I'm very interested in this as I've worked a lot here with Indigenous languages and the preservation and rejuvenation of

languages, and how desperately important it is. If we can relate that to the drying up of language... if we lose the language for grief, or if we limit that language — through the church or institutions or capitalism or whatever else — into meaning a particular thing, do we lose our way or options for how to grieve, and minimise our humanity? In the prologue I was trying to tease out ideas of petrifying and sealing over our grief, of being stuck in grief, as opposed to expressing grief. As you say, this idea appears in many other mythologies — the amber tears — and it's the shedding of those tears which comes back again to the idea of transformation, which propels us into a different part of the cycle of grief. Transformation is really what I was trying to write about, which happens in the aftermath of grief, and how one can move forward, as opposed to 'get over it'. I was extending that metaphor to language and story. Without drawing on all these stories, we may lose ideas and metaphors we may need.

Sam: *There is a tension between country and regional and city in Australia, and there is this movement in your protagonist's past and present, could you speak to that?*

Dani: I just keep on thinking of the idea of the unsettled settled. Years ago, when I was overseas, people would say 'Australians are everywhere'. I hadn't really realised that, until I was there, and that I was one of them. We have this reputation as great travellers. I think there is an unsettledness, but also, we've inherited migratory genes from our ancestors, I guess: explorers, prisoners, free settlers, miners, and refugees, that's our (European) history. The settlement story in this town mirrors the story of the continent and maybe it's easier to see because of the size of the population. I definitely wanted to reflect that in my book, that movement and crossing country and trying to come to terms with Country. Does that answer your question? I could have just written about here, but bringing in those references to other places, and to the movement between them, is to own this tendency towards movement, and the status of a traveller, and the implications of this on her ability to 'know' a place.

Sam: *Another potential fault line your story moves deftly across is the mainly Aboriginal world of the communities much of the story moves through, and the whiter world of Amber's past and then also Alice Springs itself. Could you speak to moving across those worlds, writing about it, and the connections to place it gives Amber and the story?*

Dani: I wanted to show that, living here inside another Country, inside that greater country we call Australia, my experience is that you're changed by living somewhere else, somewhere like this.

This idea of 'crossing' really resonates with me, this word, because it's not something I've found easy to understand. I've experienced a kind of loneliness in both places, with those feelings, with the whole of me not in either place. I wanted to straddle those same worlds through the book and the character of Amber, by making her have just been back in that other world and coming anew into this world, to show the disparity. And, as you said before, I don't think a lot of people have written about this place in that same way, [and] a lot of people who've lived here in the desert, in town or in communities, have fed back to me that they have had this same experience. It's hard to explain even now. It's an uncertainty of belonging in either place, and being an outsider and an insider. But you're neither of those things anymore, in either place.

Sam: *You have a chapter called 'Wiltja, Shelter from the Wind'. Serendipitously, I used to work as a youth worker at a boarding school for kids from the APY lands called Wiltja (shelter). Could you discuss your occasional usage of Pitjantjatjara in the novel and how your personal experiences in Alice Springs influenced the novel?*

Dani: When I first lived here, I worked in the language and linguistics department at Batchelor Institute, doing tutoring work, and that turned my attention to the dire state of languages in this region. Later, I worked for years on a project called Ngapartji Ngapartji, the stage play of which was based upon the story of actor Trevor Jamieson, and the Maralinga story. We toured Australia with that play over those years and worked a lot out on communities and it's actually [in] that time that a lot of the original material for *Return to Dust* came [to be], in terms of my thinking and my writing. That Ngapartji Ngapartji time clarified for me the importance of language. It was my introduction to the Pitjantjatjara language, where I started to learn that language and meet a lot of speakers of that language. The greater aim of that project was to achieve a national Indigenous languages policy.

For the last five years I've been working on a project called Uti Kulintjaku which is a mental health and language initiative. So, I feel very strongly about language and its importance. Bringing it into the book was a big question though, because I was trying to write fiction, but I couldn't make a language up — that would just seem really unethical. But if I were to leave language out, it would seem, to me, like an omission. I wanted to make

language present, make it part of the country where this story is set. So, with permission, I included language.

When you live so long in a place, there is this osmosis between cultures, as there is between land and people. And people here are of the land and you learn about different ways of being and language comes into that. In the book, I was using language, not in a very conscious way, but [more so] if a word came to me naturally. ‘Wiltja’ is a word I think about because I’ve heard it so many times and it’s used in Alice Springs just in everyday life. It was a way to overcome this sense of separateness and other, to show this influence across cultures. Language is one way to do it, to show a sort of hybrid culture that develops in regional places, but there are other ways we are influenced too that we may not know about. It’s very hard to describe. In language, no word translates to another word, so when you’re given a word or are made aware of a word, it’s so beautiful and so poetic. It opens up new meanings for you, in terms of seeing or understanding.

Sam: *Amber travels through a number of remote communities with women she knows and it is almost as though moving through the landscape with these women, joining them for a funeral and sharing the grief, gives her the strength to finally face her own grief awaiting her in Alice.*

Dani: I think that is related to what we talked about before. You know, [in my] earlier writing or the notes I drew upon when I wrote the story, I guess I was trying not to write about people and imagining that I could write like that and talk about what Country or land was giving in terms of healing. But so many little things and so many things that happened actually related to people — I knew I needed to write those people. I remember when I went to a friend, a Pitjantjatjara woman, and asked her, telling her I was feeling unsure as I needed to include people, not name them, but to bring them in, and she was, you know, so moved. She said, ‘you’re going to write about us — what you learnt from us, that’s what you’re going to do.’ She was so happy.

I felt, for me, I just wanted to make visible that truth of what this Country is: the Country is the people. It might be tricky to write about because you don’t want to get it wrong, and you don’t want to misrepresent, or represent. And I don’t know if I have or not, but I wanted to make sure that the inclusion in that story, that healing, included the people who had offered knowledge and insight or even experience and joy. And obviously, I

handpicked certain things that happened over time to create the fiction, which is the narrative, but I did want to honour the people.

And one final thing: we're always rethinking, trying to define what it is about land, but land doesn't exist in isolation. As long as we have existed, land has been populated. From living here, I better understand the connection between humans and the environment. Land isn't a physical mass but it's very connected to people, so to live in a place one is influenced by the physical, as well as the cultural, and that is what I was trying to convey.

Samuel J. Cox is a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide. His forthcoming thesis is entitled 'Dust Country' and uses the movement of dust across time and place and story to ask questions about 'land' and how we write about it. He has formerly worked as a youth worker, is a keen amateur photographer and is something of a wanderer in his writing and travels.

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