

Tyenna, by Julie Hunt and Terry Whitebeach

Published by Allen & Unwin, 2022; ISBN: 9781760877019.

Notes prepared for the launch of Tyenna, online.¹

[Referring to a reflection on Tyenna by a young reader, Billie, included near the beginning of the YouTube video]:

Billie identifies some key features of *Tyenna*, Julie Hunt's, and Terry Whitebeach's lovely new book:

- Myrtle: *Who? You need to read the book!* However, Myrtle is celebrated, and, in celebrating her, Terry and Julie have celebrated artists wondrously too. They show us why, fanciful and "unnecessary" as artists may sometimes be made out to be, they are actually incredibly valuable!
- Of the world, there's Bailey – a runaway boy who doesn't want to be found. He is both a mystery and a moral dilemma for the novel's eponymous hero, Tyenna – Tye. He might even be a little bit of a hero.
- Billie mentioned her own experiences during the 2019 fires – the same fires also burnt the Central Plateau (a high region in the centre of lutruwita-Tasmania) and the little settlements around the Great Lake, the region where *Tyenna* is set, ostensibly. Terry and Julie have sensitively fictionalised the location, out of respect the people of those communities, many of whom helped them with their research for *Tyenna*. The depth of their research shows in their authentic representation of the variety and diversity of the people of the Central Highlands and their ways of living, resilience in the face of the fire, and response to its traumatic effects (both during the fires and afterwards).

In talking about her own experiences, Billie mentioned that how working – doing the everyday and extraordinary things that needed doing during the fires – helped her to not worry too much. Like Billie, Tye also helps out and, by working, protects herself from some of the distress she might have felt due to her concern for Bailey, the animals, her grandparents and everything else threatened by the fires.

- Billie also mentions how Tye wanted to do something to responded to the greater, overarching threat of climate change, which has so many effects including increased frequency and intensity of wildfires (bushfires). She gets involved with a program to protect and re-plant endangered Tasmanian Pencil Pines. Her involvement gives her the most important thing – hope, which this marvellous book offers too.

Tyenna isn't just a story about Tasmania, or about a Tasmanian community's response to a terrible fire, it's also about that immense concern for us all – climate change. Climate change disproportionately affects today's children more than any of us, and causes significant trauma and anxiety already. We are not only anxious about its possible future effects, but also about impacts that are already being felt by thousands of people in Australia and around the world. Allen and Unwin's 'Through My Eyes: Natural Disaster Zones' series, of which *Tyenna* is the first book published, was developed as a response to these issues. Lyn White wanted the books to offer 'inspirational stories of courage, resilience and hope' giving insight into environment, community and identity through the eyes of one child. It's sad that such books are needed, yet they are not just necessary, it's actually inspiring that the series is being published by such a well-known and respected publisher. Through My Eyes books will show children how to look after not only themselves but also their community and environment. They offer knowledge, strength and hope.

¹ *Tyenna - In Conversation with Julie Hunt and Terry Whitebeach*, published by Hobart Bookshop. YouTube, 23rd March 2022: <https://youtu.be/5zDUbCbECdo>

At the Youth4Climate Summit in Milan last year, Greta Thunberg said:

“Hope is not passive. Hope is not blah blah blah. Hope is telling the truth. Hope is taking action. And hope always comes from the people. And we, the people, we want a safe future, we want real climate action and we want climate justice.”

Tyenna's hero, Tye, models these principles. Her story is one of personal and social growth – of learning to navigate relationships and conflict, and caring for others. It's also about knowing what to do, *and having the courage*, to do what's necessary to survive a natural disaster. And it's about affirmative action: holding onto hope and *acting* in accordance with what you believe in.

Tyenna shows us what the writers of lutruwita-Tasmania can offer the world. It's all of us – The World – who must now contend with the detrimental effects of impacts humans have had on the systems and processes that make life possible on this planet. The writers of lutruwita-Tasmania have long been at the forefront of a response. The world's first Green party started here, on this island. It aimed to represent the interests of the non-human world within that most human sphere, politics. The island also founded one of the world's first tertiary institutions for environmental education – the University of Tasmania's Centre for Environmental Studies. It was there, during the 1990s, that I did my first degree major and honours. It's hard to say exactly why I chose Environmental Studies. Perhaps I didn't really 'choose' it; rather, the place itself nudged me that way. Lutruwita-Tasmania has a 'realness' you can't easily look away from. The stories I heard in Environmental Studies spoke to me. They were about nature and people I recognised and they deepened my understanding of this place and enriched all my other stories.

Lutruwita-Tasmania's natural history and environmental features – its plants and animals, rocks and landforms – have always seemed, to me, quite integral to our human lives here. In Europe, it seemed that many people saw themselves as more separate from their environment than Tasmanians. Environmental 'issues' were, for Europeans, overwhelmingly things expected to impact negatively on humans, such as pollution, toxins or waste. Tasmanians, thought there was this thing called 'intrinsic worth' that the environment had. This meant that an impact could be a problem simply because it affected 'the environment', regardless of its effects on humans. Maybe it's because we live quite close to places where relatively intact natural systems can be observed, close enough to know them pretty well; perhaps even to 'love' the natural world.

I think these ideas meant that many Tasmanians loved the environment so much that they wanted it to be free to take its own course.² (“If you love someone set them free”, the saying goes.) But that isn't happening. Nowadays human activities have countless deleterious effects on the physical, chemical and biological properties and functioning of our planet and the systems that hold everything together. The most wide-reaching and troubling of these effects are associated with climate change. Climate change is something that we can clearly see the impacts of, here, in lutruwita-Tasmania. At Port Arthur there is a sea level benchmark more than 160 years old that shows how sea levels have risen. On the central plateau, where *Tyenna* is set, ancient Gondwanan ecosystems are struggling due to multiple effects of climate change, including drought (the central plateau is affected by one now) and dry lightning storms – previously a virtually unheard of phenomenon.

² Please note that I write in the past tense here, for my intention is to convey the ideas and sentiments of the times, which gave rise to the origins of the environment movement I have described. The idea of an environment (or 'wilderness'/wild places) unaffected by humans is contentious territory nowadays, for several good reasons. One of these is because we now recognise that first peoples all over the world changed their environment, such that it is probably fair to say that, since the dawn of humanity no place has been unaffected by our kind. I think a grain of truth remains however. Prior to the current age human impacts did change natural systems, but not in a way that threatened catastrophic collapse of the whole. What I referred to, above, as 'relatively intact natural systems' remained. Relatively intact means systems that are capable of continuing to operate in the relatively predictable ways we have come to understand (somewhat); that can continue to support the world as we know it (in which change occurs, but slowly and quite predictably); rather than systems that are failing and contributing to rapid change, unpredictability, and threatening our own ongoing existence and that of other species.

On the 15th of January 2019 dry storms resulted in 2,402 lightning strikes across lutruwita-Tasmania. These started more than 70 fires, including several on the central plateau, some of which converged into what is now referred to as 'the fire'. The storms could be said to have sparked *Tyenna*. Like the lightning, it might be nice to be able to say that we didn't need *Tyenna*; but we do need Terry and Julie's novel, and we're lucky to have it. Billie has told us exactly why: we were all scared that summer. We were scared for our homes, our families, our way of life and our unique environment with all of its beautiful plants and beloved animals. Our normally bright summer skies were filled with smoke and the sun turned an ominous, dull red. Water carrying aircraft became an everyday sight. It was even a bit exciting; Terry and Julie nailed it when they wrote about people in kayaks and boats getting in the way of the aircraft. They really did get out there, risking their lives and interfering with firefighting. We knew that the fires posed a real threat too though. If we hadn't already written our bushfire plans we were at least starting to think sensibly about what needed to be saved, and when we might need to go. As Julie herself said, in another interview, cars were packed and ready to evacuate.

But Julie had another response as well, one for the longer term. Like Tye she opted for action and she got out there, learning, learning about indigenous fire management and getting involved in a Pencil Pine rehabilitation project, and much more – all of which eventually gave us *Tyenna*.

There is a break in my presentation at this point, as Terry reads some extracts from *Tyenna* and Julie speaks about her research and the Pencil Pine rehabilitation project. The authors then offer thanks to supporters before I conclude with the following.

Tyenna deals with serious matters: climate change, the deadly force of wildfires, and confronting things head on. It's about a young girl, Tye, experiencing all these things, and through them, growing – growing into her community and her sense of herself. *Tyenna* is about trust and looking after others – especially the 'missing boy', Bailey – who doesn't want to be found. It's in this fold of the story that Tye faces her most confronting personal dilemma, and gets into a somewhat dangerous and difficult situation. It's high drama! But readers who join Tye will meet some lovely characters and go on an amazing adventure. *Tyenna* is a great read. I loved it and I'm sure others will too. (Never mind the recommended age range!)