



DUB LEFFLER: DARKISH

# DARKISH — A LITERARY RESPONSE

## BY CATHIE TASKER

*I love illustrating because you're part of a particular tradition going back thousands of years. Telling stories with images is the progenitor of written language. Plus, the fact you are helping children read and thereby learn about the world through one's work is an honor unto itself.*

DUB LEFFLER

Dub Leffler is an illustrator, writer, animator and mixed media artist, working in the arts through books, film, television, muralism and art education. He has taught and workshopped illustration from Australia to Scotland, Indonesia and the United States. He is known for his soft, realistic portraits and emotional landscapes, and is one of Australia's most prominent First Nations artists.

Leffler is descended from the Bigambul and Mandandanji peoples of southwest Queensland as well as being of French, Syrian and Irish heritage. He was a ward of the state for sixty-two days after he was born on New Year's Day in 1976 and spent all of those days in the hospital waiting to be adopted. "Darkish" was the term used by the adoption agency to describe Dub Leffler as a child. Although this term referred to Leffler's skin color, he believes it could equally be used to describe his emotional state and has said that this was his "real darkish time." He says he "has no recollection of that time—whether I was in a ward with other babies or by myself for all that time... or who cared for me during those days. It's all a mystery." After being adopted, Leffler grew up in Quirindi near Tamworth, New South Wales. He reconnected with his Aboriginal family for the first time when he was twenty-five years old and now keeps in touch with both families.

*1976. The mother states that she is a married woman, having married Thomas Richard Heagney at Dirranbindi, Queensland on 29 October 1965, but that her husband is not the father of the subject child. The child's mother is 27 years old, a woman with quite distinct aboriginal features. Mrs. Heagney states that she has also some Syrian blood. The baby is a most attractive child, and is darkish, but not markedly aboriginal in appearance. He is in excellent health, and is reported to be ready for discharge from hospital. When consenting to the*

Excerpt from Dub Leffler's adoption file.





Detail of *Narcisse and Sassy*, 2020, watercolor and pencil on paper, 38 x 27.5 in.



Detail of *Still*, 2018, coffee and pencil on paper, 19.5 x 12 in.



While the exhibition at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia features several of Leffler's works of fine art, it mostly concentrates on his books. As an artist his work explores how Indigenous children have been represented in children's literature. Historically, images of Aboriginal children were excluded and until recent times, Australian literature focused on white children or on animals. When Aboriginal children were included in children's books, they were often stereotyped as primitive, wild or animal-like.

*One More Page* podcast says, "boy, does that man know how to wield a paintbrush or a pencil." Leffler, unlike many contemporary Indigenous illustrators, paints and draws in a traditional European realist style. His style and approach reminds us of the work of Robert Ingpen, renowned Australian illustrator. His range is wide—from realistic people, to the landscape, to accurate yet evocative illustrations of objects and animals that come to life on the page. He explores mood in the more gentle books such as *Bindi* and *Once There Was a Boy*, but it is *Sorry Day* that dominates our impression of his work. It's such an important book, so widely used in Australian classrooms and celebrated by librarians and reviewers.

If Leffler's work is perceived as "darkish" it is because he is unafraid to show joy or sorrow in his soulful illustrations of people—black or white—or in his vivid landscapes. But the most outstanding element of Dub's work is his characters' eyes. The eyes offer a focus, and the images unfold to faces, figures and landscapes that are deeply expressive and evocative. This warmth, and his color palette, as in *Still* (2018), derived from the use of coffee as a form of pigment, are what makes his work so appealing and accessible.

The emotion that haunts the eyes of Leffler's characters suggests the dark history that underlies many of the books he illustrates. Leffler blends a classical style with raw emotion, managing to straddle the harshness of history and the relative

*The most  
outstanding  
element of  
Leffler's work is  
his characters'  
eyes, and  
the inherent  
warmth in all the  
illustrations.*

gentleness required from illustrators for children in picture books. Leffler's illustrations match the mood, tone and content of the text in the books he illustrates. While many of the themes address darkness in the world, they hint at this without overwhelming the child.

When illustrating a book, Leffler begins with a soundtrack, often the sounds of the landscape, and thinks of each book like a movie. He works from storyboards, considers angles and creates the characters to extend the meaning of the text. He regards each book as a "big story" and treats it like a "big production". Leffler often layers image upon image like a montage to build emotional impact, counterpoising a key landscape with a key character, or arranging multiple portraits alongside iconic images of trucks, photos, coins and other objects and landmarks, especially in *Look What We Have Done* (2018) from *Sorry Day*. Adept at painting water, Leffler's ocean scenes saturate the page, while desert images evoke the withering heat of inland summer, summoning a sense of the sublime from the most disparate geographies. This is highlighted best in *Once There Was A Boy*, but it's also evident in illustrations like *Narcisse and Sissy* (2020) from *Strangers On Country*.

His award-winning bestseller picture book *Once There Was A Boy* has received international recognition, including being placed in the permanent collection of the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., and being featured several times at the Bologna Children's Book Fair. This book has an emotional depth that is unexpected from the simplicity of the story of a boy living alone on an island, when a girl shows up and breaks his heart. He is currently working on the sequel to *Once There Was A Boy*—titled *Once There Was A Girl*. Leffler's illustrations of these characters, often depicted as small in a vast and beautiful landscape, communicate the emotional undercurrents in the story, as the metaphors develop and become a satisfying whole. It is a story of conflict, friendship, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Written by Coral Vass, *Sorry Day* won the 2019 Eve Pownall Award for Information Books from the Children's Book Council of Australia. *Sorry Day* deserves wider acclaim than it has received, and it is unfortunate that the literal interpretation of the movement toward diversifying children's literature has resulted in this book being sidelined. It is a positive and important feature that *Sorry Day*, a book about the Stolen Generation and the Australian Prime Minister's apology in 2008, has creators with both heritages. Vass is a white author,





Detail of *Dirranbandi*, 2018, watercolor, coffee and pencil on paper, 13 x 13 in.



*Look at What We Have Done*, 2018, watercolor, coffee and pencil on paper, 29.5 x 12.5 in.





and Leffler an Indigenous man, and the “Sorry” speech was directed at audiences with both white and black heritages. The book offers a meeting of minds and cultures. Despite being overlooked by some, this book is a bestseller, popular in classrooms, libraries and with the buying public.

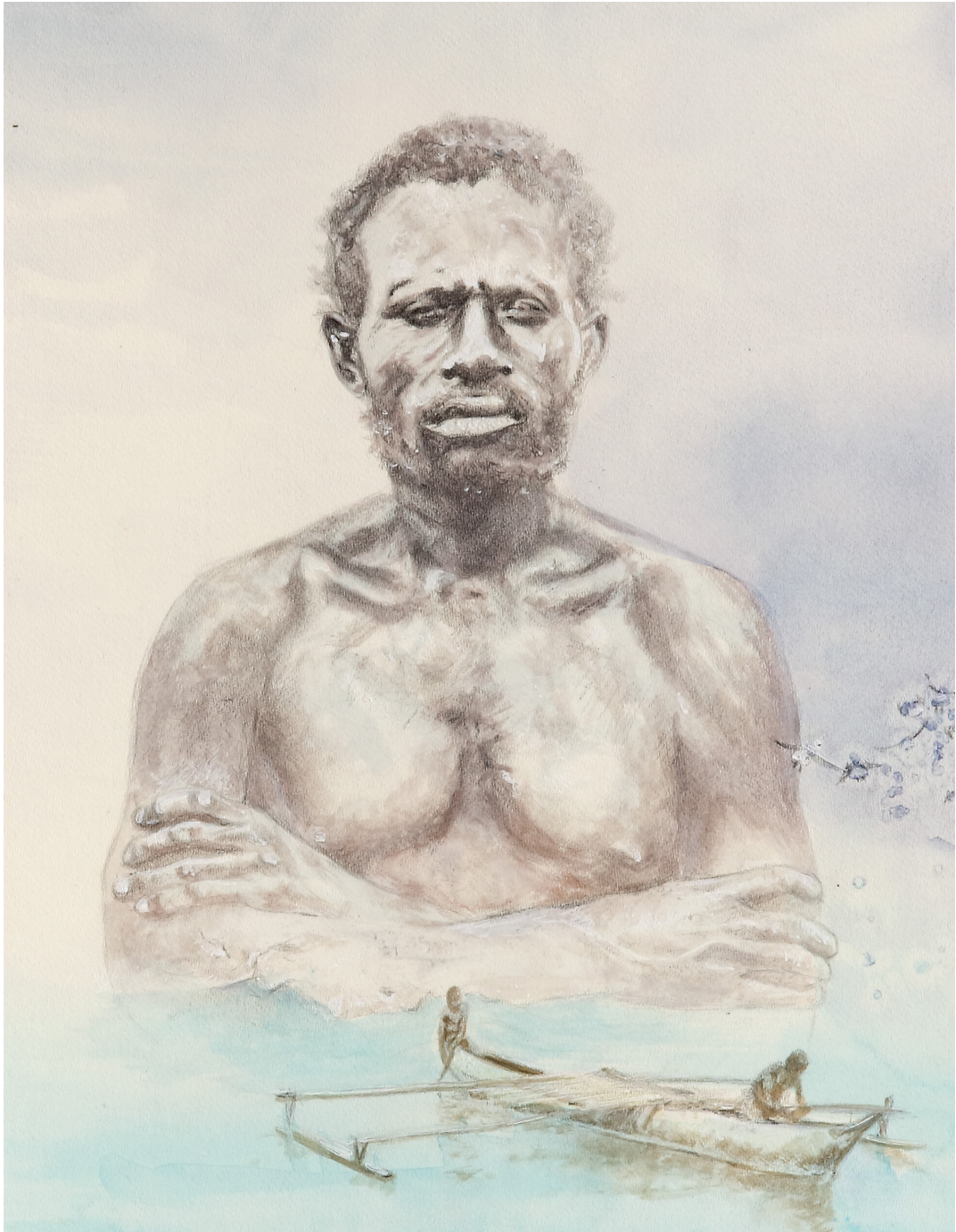
Vass acknowledged the authenticity discussion in her speech accepting the Eve Pownall Award when she thanked Leffler: “Thank you for being willing to illustrate this book. I know it was an emotional, and at times difficult, journey for you. Thank you for your stunning illustrations that brought this book to life and made it what it is. Without you, there would be no book.” And he responded with his own thanks for Coral: “...for seeing the necessity of creating such a book so that children of the future may know their past...” He believes this is the most important book he will ever illustrate.

*Strangers on Country* by Dave Hartley, Kirsty Murray, and illustrated by Dub Leffler, is a historical fiction narrative based on historical records. It shares the stories of when people were shipwrecked and ended up living with Indigenous people. One point of view is from an Indigenous person who befriends the stranger in their land. The other point of view is the castaway or convict who was given refuge. Leffler’s illustrations often juxtapose the character above the landscape in the story, which is visible in works like *Giom and Tomagugu* (2020), and he also includes illustrations of objects, accurately researched and rendered.

Leffler’s distinguished career as an illustrator shows no signs of slowing down. Recently released, *Rocky and Louie* by Phil Walleystack, Raewyn Caisey, and illustrated by Dub Leffler, is a picture book story with an Australian Football League framework. Two Aboriginal brothers grow up playing football. We feel we are sharing the brothers’ lives, as Rocky teaches Louie about kicking goals, looking after country, and keeping culture strong. But Rocky has big dreams and has to move away to chase them. Later this year will see the release of *Bindi*, a book of poems by Kirli Saunders. *Bindi* is illustrated in just black, white and grey, showcasing the strength and range of Leffler’s work even with a limited palette.

Leffler is a warm and insightful illustrator of picture books. Margaret Whiskin, editor at Magabala Books, the primary publisher of Indigenous children’s literature in Australia, says, “Working with Dub is one of my biggest joys as an editor with Magabala! His creativity, humor and sheer brilliance is inspiring.” He is a generous





Detail of *Giom and Tomagugu*, 2020, watercolor and pencil on paper, 38 x 27.5 in.



Cootamundra, 2018, coffee and pencil on paper, 19.5 x 13.75 in.





LINK-UP  
P.O. BOX 185, ST. MARYS

member of the children's literature community, sharing his passion for books by reading on social media and in schools where he is a popular presenter. Whether in the boldly saturated works of his fine art practice, or in the gentler watercolor and pencil media of his illustrations for children, the eyes are consistently expressive, often haunting, often pensive, as well as warm and laughing when the occasion calls. His soft realism is unusual and refreshing, and readers can relate to it easily, seeing themselves, their friends, and their culture rendered so beautifully. Leffler's stature in the Australian picture book scene is unsurpassed as he continues to explore Aboriginal people's connection to country and culture through use of subtle metaphor, mood and stunning art.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kirli Saunders and Dub Leffler (illus.), *Bindi* (Broome: Magabala Books, 2021).

Dub Leffler, *Once There Was A Boy* (Broome: Magabala Books, 2011)

Coral Vass and Dub Leffler (illus.), *Sorry Day* (Canberra: National Library of Australia Publishing, 2018)

David Hartley, Kirsty Murray and Dub Leffler (illus.), *Strangers on Country* (Canberra: National Library of Australia Publishing, 2020)

Raewyn Caisley, Phillip Walleystack and Dub Leffler (illus.), *Rocky and Louie* (Melbourne: Penguin Books Australia, 2020)



## ABOUT DUB LEFFLER

Dub Leffler is an illustrator, writer, animator and mixed media artist, working in the arts through books, film, television, muralism and art education. He has taught and workshoped illustration in Australia, Scotland, Indonesia and the United States. He is a prominent children's book illustrator and author, collaborating with Sally Morgan, Banksy, Coral Vass and others, and is known for his soft realistic portraits and emotional landscapes. He is descended from the Bigambul and Mandandanji people of southwest Queensland as well as being of French, Syrian and Irish heritage. He lives with his daughter and family of chickens on the Central Coast of New South Wales in Darkinjung country. His award-winning bestseller picture book *Once There Was A Boy* (2011) received international recognition, was acquired by the Library of Congress and was featured several times at the Bologna Children's Book Fair. More recently, Leffler illustrated *Sorry Day* (2018), written by Coral Vass, which won the 2019 Eve Pownall Award for Information Books from the Children's Book Council of Australia. *Black Cockatoo* (2018), which he illustrated, was also an Honour Book that year. At last count, Dub has created 25 books.



## ABOUT CATHIE TASKER

Once a publisher and editor, Cathie Tasker has edited and commissioned nearly 800 books and now works as a creative writing teacher and freelance project manager of picture books. She has worked with Australia's leading trade and children's book publishers: Magabala Books, HarperCollinsPublishers, Scholastic Australia and Koala Books. She judges literary awards for fun, and has worked with the Children's Book Council of Australia, the Aurealis Awards, the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and others. She is passionate about books, reading and online learning. Cathie sees her most important skill as teaching writing and working as a structural or developmental editor to help authors shape and develop their work. She is a member of Freelance Editors Network and works as a teacher, mentor, consultant, manuscript assessor and speaker. Cathie lives on the Central Coast of New South Wales in Darkinjung country.



# DUB LEFFLER: DARKISH

JANUARY 28 - JUNE 27, 2021

## KLUGE-RUHE ABORIGINAL ART COLLECTION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

400 Worrell Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22911

434-244-0234 | kluge-ruhe.org

Open by reservation only due to COVID-19 until further notice.

ISBN 9978-1-7353269-1-7

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Dub Leffler dedicates this exhibition to his grandmother, Amelia Dancey (nee Hopkins) who was passing away just as his daughter was being born: "You knew the old Bigambul songs in language and went to the very last Bigambul corroboree. This marks the first exhibit by a Bigambul person overseas in the history of Bigambul people."



KLUGE - RUHE ▸ ABORIGINAL  
ART ◀ COLLECTION  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



UVA Mellon  
Indigenous Arts Initiative

