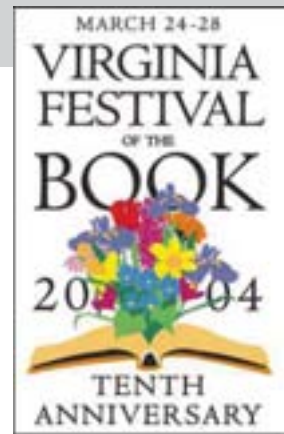


***Country of the Heart* by Deborah Bird Rose, et al. recommended by Margaret Smith**

A program of the Virginia Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Margaret Smith—director and curator of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia—recommends *Country of the Heart* by Deborah Bird Rose, et al. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland is a photographic journey through the floodplains and tablelands of North Australia, narrated by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose and members of the MakMak (White Eagle) clan. MakMak homelands include crocodile-infested swamps and paperbark forests where the ground is actually a floating pad of grass. During the wet season, the entire landscape appears to be in flood, and during the dry season it is aflame. If this sounds less than idyllic, take a look at Sharon D'Amico's photographs of the sunset on Didjini billabong. The natural beauty of this region is uncontested, although the land itself has been the center of intense dispute.

While MakMak people have called this land "home" for countless millennia, it took a 1994 lawsuit against the Northern Land Council for their claims of traditional ownership to be legally recognized. Rose met MakMak elders Nancy Daiyi, Kathy Deveraux, Margaret Daiyi, Linda Ford and April Bright while gathering evidence for the lawsuit. She spent months learning about their unique relationship to the land, expressed in their cosmology and stewardship of indigenous plants and animals.

When MakMak people survey their landscape, they see the work of ancestral beings that fashioned its features in the period of creation called 'the Dreaming.' Old Man Goose, for example, who played the didjeridu and gathered all of the animals together for a ceremony, is credited with

creating the Florence River. Magpie geese, prevalent in the region, are living reminders of the ancestor and important 'bush tucker' (food) for MakMak people. Their honking recalls the music of Old Man Goose.

MakMak people recognize an interconnection between person, place and species or ancestral beings called *mirr*. In early pregnancy, an unusual event announces the identity of the child, which relates both to a place and a Dreaming ancestor. When Margaret Daiyi was pregnant she saw a big crocodile on the beach. A few days later her husband caught a 16-foot saltwater crocodile in his fishing net. These two events indicated the crocodile was their son's *mirr*.

Human relationships to country are intensely personal, which makes sense because country is regarded as a sentient being. Rose explains "People talk about country the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, grieve for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy." This becomes particularly poignant when we learn that MakMak country has experienced devastating ecological degradation from introduced species such as water buffalo, feral pigs, and a noxious weed called *Mimosa pigra*.

Comments by the Aboriginal co-authors are interspersed throughout the text, showing how

the MakMak people are today using their ecological knowledge to combat *Mimosa pigra* and manage their country. This beautiful book combines hundreds of stunning photographs of the country and people with sensitive, informative descriptions of their culture and lifestyle. The book could help us rethink

the way we view and manage environmental issues in our own.

Country of the Heart collaborators *Deborah Bird Rose* and *Margaret Daiyi* will speak at the *Virginia Festival of the Book* on Friday, March 26 at 6 p.m. at *Second Street Gallery*.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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