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Foreword

For this book, forty-nine Australian writers have gazed at our big Inland sky and imagined new narrative paths to connect Heaven and Earth, our planet with its Universe, and our inner worlds with the great beyond. Most live or have lived on isolated farms, in country villages and towns or in the small cities of south-eastern Australia's Inland and know this region well. Others have visited the Inland from their homes on the continent's coastal fringe to be inspired by our vast daytime vistas and the full cosmic glory of our night skies which can, of course, only be experienced now from the most unpolluted and sparsely populated places. I am very proud to introduce you to these writers' work.

Dark Sky Dreamings emerged from my Skywriters Project, part of the Big Skies Collaboration to catalyse new cultural and other opportunities for rural and remote communities in Inland New South Wales and the ACT. Over the past three years, I've travelled thousands of kilometres in Scarlet O'Barbara, the old red Toyota wagon gifted to me for this project by a literary friend. Scarlet is big enough for me to throw my camping gear in the back, and even sleep in her when conditions outside get rough. The Project has been conducted on such a miniscule budget that the amenities Scarlet provides have been fundamental to its success, as has the support provided by our many project partners, collaborators and friends.

I've met well over a hundred Inland writers at Skywriters events hosted by public libraries in Narrabri, Warren, Gilgandra, Coonabarabran, Dubbo, Parkes, Forbes, Condobolin, Grenfell, Cowra, Orange, and Bathurst, and at gigs hosted by Parkes Shire Council, Dubbo's Outback Writers Centre, Milroy Observatory and by local supporters in Molong and elsewhere. Skywriters newsletters and social media posts, including our call-out for submissions to this anthology, have reached hundreds more people within and beyond our region with the support of our partners, including New England Writers Centre, Writing NSW, Outback

Writers Centre, Red Room Poetry and the Wiradjuri Study Centre, and many individual supporters, including astronomers and astrophysicists.

The works in this book are as diverse as the authors themselves: funny, inspiring, thought provoking, poignant and profound. You'll find intensely personal memoirs, essays that evoke a deep sense of home and belonging, Sci-Fi fantasies that take you to freshly imagined worlds, and poems of transcendent beauty about our place in the Universe. Some skystories are light and entertaining comfort food, while others address obdurate social challenges: domestic violence, misogyny, sexism, racism, white supremacism, religious fundamentalism, mental illness, animal cruelty, environmental degradation, rural conservatism, the impacts of colonisation on First Nations peoples, and, of course, our species' future here and elsewhere in the Universe.

These issues polarise people in Inland communities, as they do in communities everywhere. Whatever the differences that segment and isolate us, however, we Inlanders all share the same big sky, all experience the same sense of awe and wonder when we gaze at the stars and planets, and all have our own skystories to tell, be they ancestral myths that encode deep sacred and secular knowledge; reports on the latest discoveries by astronomers and astrophysicists using the many Inland research observatories; astrological prognostications and horoscope readings; spiritual beliefs about sky deities and mystical events; bush yarns about encounters with UFOs; futuristic speculations and fantasies about alternate universes; space travel or life on other planets; or lamentations and curses about the absence of rain-bearing clouds to end our present drought. In these difficult times, stories that unite us rather than divide are more important than ever.

This Project has exceeded my expectations in so many ways. It has produced this anthology. It has brought together a dispersed network of creatives who are passionate about nurturing the arts and sciences in Inland communities, promoting cultural diversity, and enticing star-deprived Metropolitans from the coastal side of the Great Dividing Range to experience the celestial panoply of our very dark nights. The Project has allowed me to brush up my networking and editing skills; engage with writers whose work I have

admired from afar; meet Inlanders who, like me, feel compelled to write; and, most importantly, to give aspiring authors support and encouragement to revise their drafts to publication standard and develop the confidence and resilience they'll need to keep going—because creative writing can be hard and lonely brain-work, no matter how experienced or well published you are.

But the Skywriters Project has also produced some very unexpected outcomes. These include the Inland Astro-Trail concept first mooted at a Skywriters event in Parkes in July 2017 and the still-nascent community organisation, Inland Astro-Trail Inc., which emerged from a Skywriters gathering in Molong later that year. The Inland Astro-Trail was conceived as an astro-tourism, cultural heritage, community development and STEAM (Science Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) outreach initiative to catalyse cultural, social, economic and educational opportunities in south-eastern Australia's rural and remote inland. Destination Network Country & Outback (DNCO) is now developing the astro-tourism component of this concept as part of the State Government's commitment to increase the number of visitors to the Inland. DNCO's consultants are now preparing the first Night Sky Experience Masterplan. We hope that many of these future astro-tourists will buy our anthology and be inspired by our stories to view both the Inland and the Universe in new ways—and even author their own skystories.

Another unexpected outcome of the Skywriters Project is the Condo SkyFest hosted by the Wiradjuri Study Centre in the remote little town of Condobolin. The SkyFest concept arose from the Wiradjuri Skywriters Project to encourage First Nations locals to record skystories in their own ways. It soon became apparent, however, that the impacts of the invasion and colonisation have been so extreme in and around Condo that few ancestral skystories have survived. Local Wiradjuri people including Tennille Dunn, Marion Packham, Bev Coe and the fibre artists of the Condo SistaShed have, nevertheless, found creative ways to revive, interpret and share ancestral skystories to inspire what could be called a cultural renaissance in their community. I feel very privileged to have been able to mentor these women and help them extend their support networks through our Big Skies Collaboration. You'll find Marion

Packham’s memoir, “Riverbank Dreaming”, in this anthology.

The Project has enriched the lives of its participants in so many ways. For me, it has been a delight to meet so many Inland writers and witness their cultural contributions to their communities, and to engage remotely with writers in other parts of Australia. And what a privilege it has been to work with local librarians and Council staff, with our many other in-kind supporters and partner organisations, with my fellow curators, and, most especially, with our publisher and Big Skies Collaborator, David Reiter, and his crew at Interactive Publications in Brisbane. My thanks to you all. The skystories in this book will resonate in Inland communities and elsewhere for many years to come. Who knows what other unexpected outcomes they will inspire?

– Merrill Findlay
Forbes, New South Wales
October, 2019