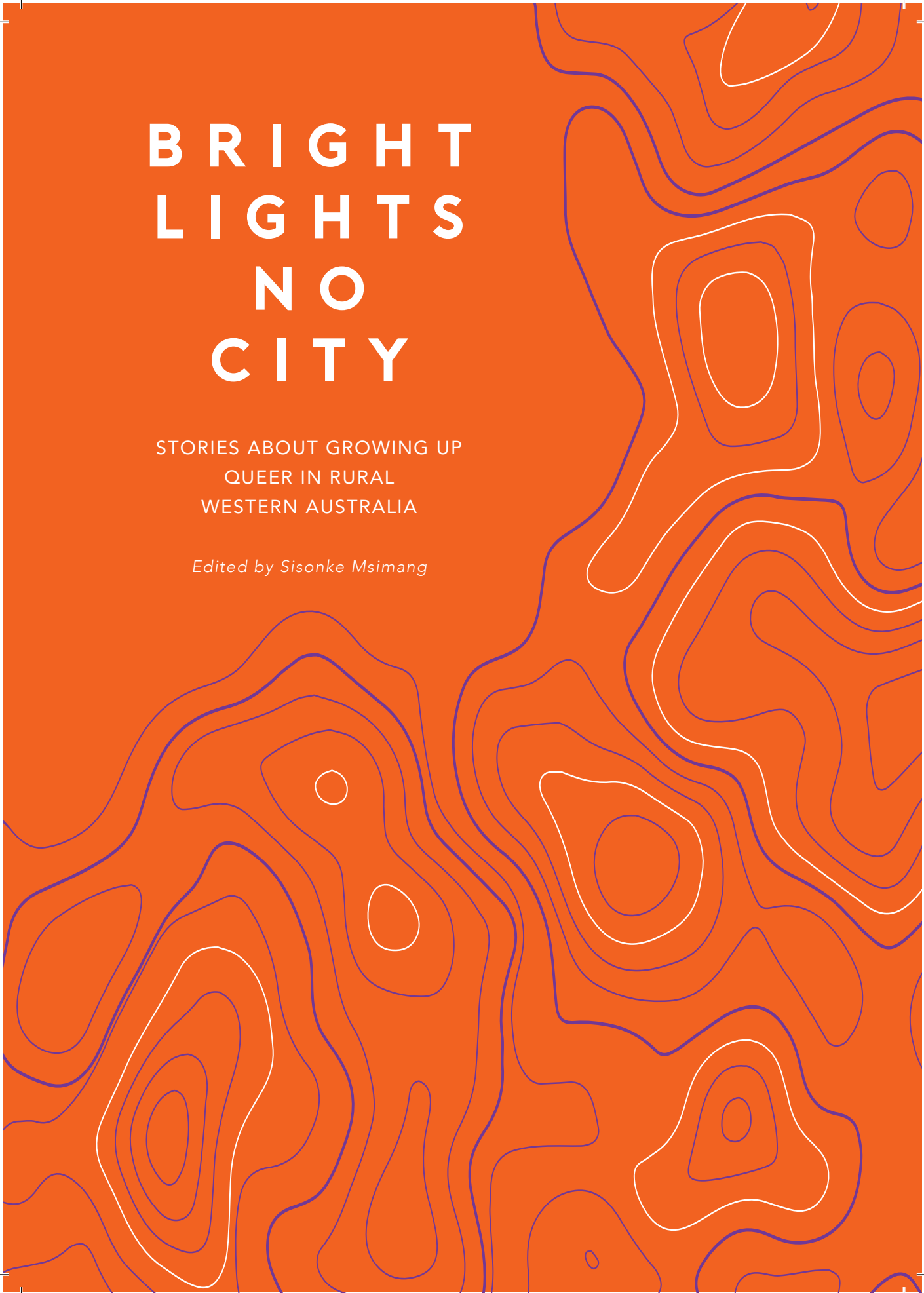




BRIGHT LIGHTS NO CITY

STORIES ABOUT GROWING UP
QUEER IN RURAL
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Edited by Sisonke Msimang





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REFLECTIONS

We met in a darkening room, at the end of the day. There were seven of us and there was a feeling of awkwardness—the feeling that comes before you decide whether you are going to participate fully in a process or whether you are going to withdraw. There were tapping feet, and fingers that drummed against thighs and a nervousness in everyone’s faces. One person looked as though they might spring up at any minute and head for the door.

Although I have moved in queer African spaces for most of my adult life, I suddenly wondered whether I was the right person to support this process. I have no idea what it is like to grow up in a small town. I am not Australian—I grew up across a range of different African countries. I live a straight suburban Perth life with two kids, a dog, a husband and, yes, a white picket fence.

So I had a moment of doubt.

I am the head story-trainer at the Centre for Stories. My job here is to help storytellers to find their true voices. Often they arrive already prepared and all they need is a little nudge. Sometimes they are scared to tell a story, and so I work with them to figure out whether or not the story they are trying to tell is ready to be told. Our process is simple. We sit in a circle, we share a rough draft, we listen to one another and we accept feedback. Over the course of a few weeks, we refine our stories so that they convey the feelings we want them to convey, and then we organise a meal or an event with a stage, or a taping, or a book, and we share those stories with those who want to listen. It is a simple, lovely and often difficult process.

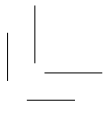
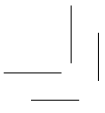


As a storyteller and trainer, I know that the biggest mistake you can make is to assume that people who seem different from you on the outside are in fact different from you on the inside. And I have learned over and over that people who are like you on the outside are often totally different from you on the inside. Still there is something seductive—and human—about judging books by their covers. So I was worried that somehow there wouldn't be enough shared points of connection between this group of rural, queer Aussie youth and me.

But it was too late: we were already sitting in the room. Everyone there had responded to a call for stories in which the Centre for Stories had asked them to reflect on growing up queer in small towns on the western edge of a continent that is on the edge of the world. So they had made their way here after work or school, or after a day spent wondering if they had a right to be here too.

And so we began to talk. I asked each of them to tell a story. And each of them did. Some stories were funny. Others were sad. One story was filled with palpable rage. There were no tears that day but there were a lot of silences. After each story there was the sort of silence that comes when you have just recognised something of yourself in someone else. Or the kind of silence that comes when you have just heard something that you will never forget. Or the kind of silence that comes when you are uncomfortable and know that words will not soothe you.

For all the talk there is these days about stories, there is far too little acknowledgement of the value of silence, the power of the pause. These stories are both filled with words and full of the kinds of moments that should give the reader pause. These are words to be savoured in silence. Or they are words that can only be met with silence. They are words that put a stop—if only momentarily—to so much of the noise of politics and the culture wars and the false moralising that characterise the media landscape.





The thrill I felt on the first night I met these storytellers is still with me and it hums through this book. The anxiety dissipated within minutes that first day and it never returned. It was replaced by awe, and gratitude. How lucky I am to have worked with such a wise, angry, joyful bunch.

I hope you find a quiet place to enjoy these stories—a patch of silence in which to savour their wisdom. And then I hope you emerge from the silence full of new words, and a vocabulary for love and longing and wonder, and that you use these words to share these special stories with everyone you know.



Sisonke Msimang

Sisonke Msimang is the author of *Always Another Country: A memoir of exile and home*. She is a South African writer whose work is focused on race, gender and democracy. She has written for a range of international publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Newsweek* and *Al Jazeera*.



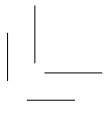
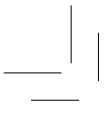
Four young people writing about growing up queer in some of the most socially and morally conservative regions in Western Australia: that takes courage, mutual support and a willingness to speak out. What a privilege it was to work with Josie, Jay, Damo and Laidley, all of whom were willing to express their anxieties and desires about their sexual identity in order to make sense of their experience, and to help others make sense of theirs. While they began the four-week mentoring program with some trepidation about what to write, how to write and even where to start, they were all open to thinking about different ways of shaping their stories. I witnessed them move from tentative beginnings to a growing sense of confidence, as they shared their experiences through conversation, and then turned back to that blank space of the page, determined to find a way to express their own particular truths.

For Josie, this meant focusing on key moments in her growing awareness of her sexual identity, and finding a language that could resist the causal but denigrating homophobia of her social environment. Jay crafted a narrative of return in which he used the “road trip” motif of travelling to and away from Kalgoorlie as a means of negotiating the difference between the public version of himself and his own authentic selfhood. Damo chose to write in a highly poetic and symbolic mode to express the contrast between the cruel reality of rejection and his fantasies of sexual desire. Laidley’s cleverly crafted coming-of-age story charted his movement from a fear of being excluded to a defiant, indeed audacious, affirmation of his complex sexuality. For all their differences in mode, style and tone, all four writers came to understand more acutely the power of language to express their identity and to communicate the reality of their inner lives.



What else did they unearth in those four weeks, when they sat in a room at the Centre for Stories, surrounded by books, and supported by the goodwill of their fellow writers? For one thing, their stories revealed a refusal to be defined by or reduced to their sexuality. While growing up queer in conservative heartland was, and clearly remains, a crucial dimension of their identity, they also had differences of opinion about social issues such as the Gay Pride March and gay marriage. Looking around that room and seeing all those books, I was reminded of the important claim by Thomas Aquinas: “Beware the person of one book.” Differences of opinion were accepted with good grace and good humour—there was a great deal of laughter in that room. In writing their stories and talking with one another, these four young people also learned that memorable writing is the product of rigorous thinking about their creative choices. It was a pleasure to help them find ways to refine their language, narrative structure and point of view in order to make their writing the best it could be, both as an act of self-expression and a profound act of communication. Finally, when three of them read out their stories to a public audience—there were a lot of sweaty palms and racing hearts—they came to understand their stories as a gift to others; in the words of the novelist C.S. Lewis: “We read to know that we are not alone.” How wonderful, then, for other young people, similarly struggling with their sexual identity, to feel a sense of solidarity, and to believe that they, too, can become the person they wish to be: fearlessly, honestly and with a sense of pride.

These stories have also had ripples of understanding in the wider community. Some of the writers have told us at the Centre for Stories about the affirming responses from former teachers and classmates who read their work online; people who expressed admiration for the courage it took to make these stories public, and who arrived at a richer understanding of what it might mean to grow up queer in a homophobic country town. These stories have clearly moved people: they have moved



them emotionally, and moved them into a new ethical space of respect for difference and diversity.

I hope that these four intelligent, charming, funny and gracious people keep writing. They might choose to keep writing about their sexuality and the social forces that have shaped them. They might choose to write about leading productive and joyful lives as citizens of the world.

I offer my thanks, as always, to the amazing Caroline Wood at the Centre for Stories, for initiating the project. Caroline has a deeply felt understanding of the power of stories to reveal who we have been and who we might wish to be, in a particular historical period and particular culture.

Susan Midalia

Susan Midalia is the author of three short story collections, *A History of the Beanbag*, *An Unknown Sky* and *Feet to the Stars*, and a novel, *The Art of Persuasion*. Her collections have been shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and twice for the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. She has a PhD in contemporary Australian women's fiction and has published on the subject in Australian and international literary journals. She retired from academia in 2007 to become a full-time writer, freelance editor and workshop facilitator.