HOW INDIGENOUS FIRE MANAGEMENT COULD HELP SAVE AUSTRALIA

FIRE COUNTRY

VICTOR STEFFENSEN

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PRAISE FOR FIRE COUNTRY

'Like this book, fire is a communicator to let people know the right fire for the right place and the right times of the year. Everyone should know about Aboriginal fire knowledge, and keeping the land clean to protect the environment and their homes.' *Uncle Russell Butler, Bandjin and Tagalaka Elder*

'*Fire Country* is without a doubt the most important book I've worked on in my twenty-five-year career as an editor. The knowledge it contains is astounding.' *Tricia Dearborn, editor and author of Autobiochemistry, The Ringing World*

'Given the current dire situation of Australia's bushfires, it is paramount that now, more than ever, the stories in *Fire Country* are heard and enacted upon for the betterment of all Australians, our wildlife and our sustainable ecosystems. Our ancient ways must become our new ways.' *Nova Peris,* Olympian, *former federal senator, 1997 Young Australian of The Year*

'Biri (fire) holds great spiritual meaning, with many stories, memories and dance being passed down from countless biri practitioners. To have clean water, you need a healthy landscape. To have a healthy landscape, you need biri … May the Eternal Flame burn forever with *Fire Country*.' *Uncle (Dr) David Dahwurr Hudson, Ewamian and Westen Yalanji Traditional Owner*

'This important book is a story of determination and commitment to restore the knowledge of cultural responsibilities and practices of cultural fire in the Australian landscape. Victor Steffensen offers understandings of Indigenous cultural practices, the relation of people to country, the healing potential of cultural fire, and the way the practices have grown over twenty years.' *Dr Jacqueline Gothe, Associate Professor, School of Design, University of Technology Sydney*

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'Victor's work and wisdom is the knowledge our land needs right now. An important reminder of our responsibility to country and the need to respect our Aboriginal knowledge systems, it is essential reading for all Australians.' *Professor Larissa Behrendt, Jumbunna Institute, University of Technology Sydney*

'For anyone interested in understanding ancient Indigenous fire knowledge as a transformative practice for survival. *Fire Country* is the true voice of the land singing out for healing and action at a moment when all life on this planet is under threat. A grassroots visionary, Victor poetically leads with the 'right fire' story for future generations.' *Dr Jason De Santolo, Associate Professor, School of Design, University of Technology Sydney*

'This turns the conventional thinking upside down, a must-read for all of those involved in land management.' *Barry J. Hunter, land management practitioner, Djabugay Aboriginal Corporation*

'In *Fire Country*, Victor Steffensen has written a detailed and elegant account of Aboriginal traditional knowledge that he learnt from the Elders in Cape York. The wisdom of the Elders shines on every page. Of all the explanations of Aboriginal knowledge systems as science, this is the one I would turn to … Even our best scientists acknowledge that we must reinstate Aboriginal environmental knowledge and what was once a continent-wide system of land management, using fire as a friend not an enemy. Victor's book will be a fundamental text for all of us involved in trying to prevent such fire disasters in the future. *Professor Marcia Langton AM, Foundation Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies, University of Melbourne, author of* Welcome to Country

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VICTOR STEFFENSEN

Hardie Grant
TRAVEL

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Hardie Grant Travel acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the country on which we work, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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This book is dedicated to all of the young and upcoming generations to be the turning point of reconnecting humanity with land and culture again.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this book may contain images and names of people who have died.

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Introduction

From a young age I grew up knowing very little about my mother's family and our Aboriginal heritage. I was always curious to know about that side of the family and keen to learn more about culture. Living in Australia means living on Aboriginal land, so I had strong reasons to understand my own connection. Every time I asked my mum questions she would tell me that my grandmother never talked about it. I've heard many Elders say that it brings too much pain and bad memories for most Aboriginal people from those generations. Many people were separated from their families, given different names and then sent to different parts of the country.

This also happened to my Nan's family around the 1920s in a town called Croydon in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It happened to many of the Tagalaka people and their country. In those times, most Aboriginal people were sent away to missions or sent to unpaid work for the new establishments. As in many places the language was lost, their lands taken, leaving many people deprived of their culture, some not even knowing who they are related to. The only thing I have recorded from those days are some old police documents. Nan didn't even get a last name when she was born, so with no birth certificate her name was just Ada until she was to be married. She had been separated from her brothers. They never really saw each other again after that. One was sent to Palm Island and the other was sent to work on cattle stations.

Nana Ada was first sent to look after a white cattle-farming family.

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She would cook, serve, clean, and be a housemaid for them. Mum used to tell me that she had to wipe the seats down before the privileged would sit in them. As I listened to the few stories my mother could tell me, I tried to imagine what it would have been like for my Elders in that time. My grandmother died when I was only five years old, so I never got to sit down to listen to her stories. If only I could have a conversation with her now – so many questions to try and enlighten me on what was lost in the past.

Like many places in Australia at that time, the tribes were hit hard by genocide. It is a similar story among so many clan groups abroad, and each suffered in similar way because of it. Some were lucky enough to retain their language and connection to country, and some retained very little at all. Some were able to keep their original features and others became a mixed race with other nations. All proud to be Aboriginal just the same. At one stage it was part of the government's plan to breed the black out of the Aboriginal race. Trying hard to erase the blood of the people, and erase their place from the land.

Not all white fellas were bad in any era or time, but we can't forget the terrible stories from those old days, the cruel deeds that did happen. It is beyond anyone's mind to understand the damage that has been done to the people and the environment up until this day, and our history is a part of that. The country and people are still suffering in so many places across the globe. Here in Australia the land is suffering more than ever before. The genocide that was cast upon the people is still affecting the country today. So before I talk about the story of bringing back the good fire, I want to acknowledge my family, my mentors, and the love for culture and country as my inspiration to write this book. A contribution to help heal the wounds of the past so they don't become problems for our children's future.

This story is just one Aboriginal fire story of many across Australia that are calling people back to country to put the right fire back onto the land. The fire is just the beginning of understanding the important journey ahead for us all.

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Part one

Finding the old people

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Chapter 1

Finding the old people

Through my childhood I was always interested in learning whatever I could about culture and the bush. I never grew up on country linked to my heritage; instead, my hometown was a little village in the rainforest called Kuranda, the home of the Djabugay people. There were people from other clan groups from all over living there too, from the earlier mission days. A large hippie population moved into town in the late sixties and seventies and set up camp too. There are still some of the old-school ones living there, cruising around. We all went to school barefoot; even when we played sport we didn't wear shoes.

I was lucky to grow up in that little rainforest town back then – there was lots of village talent to inspire. A free-living place with plenty of live music, fresh food markets, and far-out characters. Just about everyone could play the guitar and we would have long nights down the river jamming by the fire. I loved playing music, and getting into drama, as artistic inspiration was all around me. The best thing about Kuranda in those days was the Barron River. Everyone loved spending time along the sandy riverbanks every day. Always going fishing and camping with my good brothers under the stars. Telling hairy-man stories as we tried to sleep on the cold sand, listening for him walking around through the night. I wanted to learn more about culture, and throughout my childhood I picked up whatever I could from my own surroundings.

My early school days in Kuranda are golden memories that always make me smile. But high school wasn't all that fun for me. That's when

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the rules came in to start wearing shoes. There wasn't anything at school that suited my personal interests, except drama class, in the first couple of years. Then the only thing that kept me at high school after that was basketball. We played every morning and afternoon, on the school team and in our hometown team, as the Kuranda Cassowaries. I grew to love playing the game because my friends were into it too. Every day I would jump the backyard fence and run down to the outdoor basketball court. At the end of the day most of the young men met up to play amazing touch footy games on the school oval.

As a kid, the hardest thing about growing up was understanding my Aboriginality as a mixed-raced person. There are a few different blood lines running through our particular family tree, like many Aboriginal people have now. German, English, Dad used to say he had Viking blood too, but I was taught by my mother to be respectful of them all. Kids in those days could be cruel and they questioned my identity on many occasions when I shared my Aboriginal heritage. But I had the ability to hang around and be comfortable with both the Aboriginal kids and the white kids, which allowed me to hear trash talk on both sides. No matter who I heard it from, it always hurt when I heard racist remarks. I would go home confused and tell my mum what some kids would say at school about Aboriginal people. She would respond by saying, 'Don't you ever forget that you have Aboriginal blood too. You tell them that and don't worry about what anybody says.'

It always made me feel better when she told me that, but I knew there was something missing. I didn't know enough about Aboriginal culture and I had no one to teach me what I wanted to know. It was a huge void in my life, a gap I wanted to fill. I certainly didn't know anything about Aboriginal fire knowledge as a kid; they didn't teach it at school and I lived in the rainforest. But I did have a fascination with fire, that was for sure. I loved making camp fires down the river and flicking matches around, watching them ignite as they flew through the air. I guess I was more of a fire bug than anything else, but what do you expect from a little kid?

I do remember my very first fire, though, and it certainly is one of the fires that I remember the most. I was about eight years old when I

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grabbed a packet of Redheads matches and went to play in the backyard. I ended up exploring the big banana patch that was growing right behind our chicken pen at the time. I stood in the middle of the banana patch, crunching on a huge pile of dead leaves. It was too good an opportunity to refuse. It was like those dead leaves were begging me to strike a match and burn them to a cinder. That is exactly what I did – I struck the match and the fire started instantly, burning the dry banana leaves to a point where I realised it was out of control.

The flames went wild and started to flame up over the chicken pen, which housed at least twenty or more fowls that fed our family. The flames rose up and engulfed the banana trees that my dad prized so much. I realised that I was about to burn down the chicken pen and that I was in big trouble. I began to panic and ran up to the house to find some way to put out the fire. My older sister was the only person I could find and she yelled out, 'You're in trouble. Quick, grab the hose!' By now the flames were starting to rise above the roof of the chicken coop and all I could think about was the hiding I was going to get from my father. My sister ran over to turn the tap on as I grabbed the hose and dashed towards the chicken pen as fast as I could.

I ran with the hose in hand at full speed towards the crime scene, then I ran out of hose, which jerked me up in the air to land flat on my back. The hose was way too short to reach the pen. All I could do was sit there and watch the flames as they engulfed the chicken coop. Luckily, Dad came to the rescue and started to put the fire out with buckets of water. He saved our chickens from being roasted alive, but the worst was yet to come. I sat there and waited for him to come over and give me the good old-fashioned hiding. That would have to be the worst trouble I have ever gotten into for lighting a fire. Little did I know that I was going to light a lot more fires in my lifetime.

By the age of seventeen I had left my home and school to head out into the big wide world. I wanted to find a way to become a ranger and be out in the bush. The only option I had came through my Aboriginal liaison officer at school. Unexpectedly, he had set me up for special entry

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into Canberra University to study cultural heritage. I needed a special entry because I didn't do too well with my senior school marks, except for cooking classes. The bizarre side of taking that uni course was that I would have to live in Canberra, the last of all places you would expect to see a North Queensland boy. Before long, I got accepted and found myself at Canberra University.

On campus I was living with other Indigenous students from around the country. I soon learnt that the only important things were hot food and keeping warm. All the other Indigenous students became family and we would look after each other. It was more about survival for us at that age, chucking in for food and taking turns at cooking meals. But when it came down to study I did try hard. One of the classes I had to do was English. It was extremely difficult and, with all due respect, not my cuppa tea. I didn't see how it was relevant to what I was wanting to learn at the time. So between that and the freezing cold weather, I only lasted a long three months before I went back home. Once one of us left to go home, most of the others followed and went back to their hometowns soon after. University may have been the wrong choice for me at that time, but it was a good short-lived memory, and at least I tried.

By mid-1991, I was home again in the sunny warm north, on the case of working out what to do next. Dad was hounding me to get a job and start doing something with my life. I didn't have a clue what to do at the time; I'd only just turned eighteen. The next best thing that came along was an invite from some Kuranda friends to go fishing out bush, up north to a little town called Laura in the lower region of Cape York. That sounded like a good opportunity, so I packed a swag and a fishing line, and jumped in the car with the rest of them. Little did I know that day was a one-way ticket to the bush and the beginning of my pathway in life.

We drove the long rough dusty road, listening to music and laughing along the way. I had no idea where we were going, or what to expect. When we arrived at Laura, I saw that it was a very small country town with a population of about a hundred people – a bit more when you included the pastoral residents on the outskirts. It was a town with the

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basics: a tiny school, a general store, a cafe, police station, clinic, and the old Quinkan Hotel.

One of the friends I was travelling with knew the people of the community pretty well and was also related to some. He wasn't only going fishing, but also looking for a job there. The town had a small Aboriginal corporation that ran a community development employment program, or CDEP. We were welcomed into the community and directed to a place where we could camp. It was good to be with someone who knew everyone, because I was a total stranger. Once we were settled in, I started to check out the Laura scene.

Most people were sitting out the front of the houses in the main street, yarning under the mango trees. I met a few people who came over to say hello; it was a fairly friendly environment. As I continued to look around I could see two old men from a distance, sitting with their families. Their names were George Musgrave and Tommy George. I was told that they were brothers, and were among the most respected and knowledgeable men in the area. I was instantly intrigued by their status and wanted to learn more about them. As I peered over at them I could see that they were watching me. Even when they weren't looking at me, it felt like they were watching me. They had a really strong presence that I was drawn to, but it made me nervous to think of approaching them.

I continued listening to my friends talking about the possibility of getting a job here. One of them suggested that I should ask for a job too, which involved asking the Elders and the local chairman of the community. I wasn't too sure about that; I wanted to go fishing first. Before long, a Toyota ute rolled up and we were told to jump in the back. A couple of the locals were taking us out to a waterhole to try to catch some barramundi.

Away we went, over dirt roads through the bush, standing up on the back of the Toyota tray. It felt so good being out bush, hunting and being free, without a care in the world. We fished all day and while we didn't really get much fish, we were happy being out on the land, enjoying the experience. As the day ended we got back into our positions on the Toyota and started on our way back to the community. I was standing

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on the back of the ute with my eyes combing the bushlands, in awe of the freedom. It was at that moment I thought to myself that being in the bush was where I wanted to be.

The next day my travelling friends were getting serious about signing up for jobs on CDEP. Fred Coleman, the chairman of the organisation, gave them approval, which made them happy. Then they turned to me and asked again if I wanted a job. I said yes, Mr Coleman gave his approval and soon enough I was signing on to join the local community workforce. I had my first job out in the big wide world. It was a work-for-the-dole program, but it was still a job to me. I was totally rapt: I went fishing and hooked a job in a little bush town.

The only problem was where I was going to live. There was already not enough housing to accommodate everyone. For a population of over a hundred people there were only eight houses for the Aboriginal community to use. One house was haunted and no one wanted to live in that one. There was a ghost of a woman with a white dress and long black hair that lived there. They called it the number eight house, and it stood mysterious and empty at the end of the street. So that left seven dwellings to house the population.

The next house I inspected only had one man living in it. That man was one of the two elderly brothers, old man Tommy George, or TG for short. He was sitting there, perched up on his front porch, smoking his pipe. He was watching every move going on in the dusty main street. The reason no one lived with him is because no one in the community could. It was his house and it was under his rules: no alcohol, don't touch his stuff, and no making a nuisance of yourself. If they broke his rules, he would literally kick their arses out onto the street. That left six houses.

The next house belonged to the older brother, George Musgrave (Poppy). Poppy was living in his house with his family, so that left five houses which were pretty full with the remaining families. As I stood there thinking about where I was going to camp I heard a gravelly voice call out to me, 'Hey boy'. It was old man TG, sitting on his front porch, giving a hand signal for me to come over. I walked over, a little nervous, and stood in front of him. He was puffing on an old cow horn he'd made

into a pipe and sipping on a big billy tin full of tea. I mean, it wasn't a cup he was drinking out of, but an actual large billy tin. He said, 'You looking for a place to stay?' I gave him a nod and he went on to say, 'Well, you can stay with me. This is my house.'

I gave him a big smile in appreciation. 'You can go inside and choose one of the spare rooms', he said. I thanked him and then slowly walked into the house. I walked along the wooden floors and down the hallway to find an empty room to lay my swag. From that day on I was living with old man TG, and I started feeling comfortable quickly. Just the two of us, sharing a three-bedroom house all to ourselves. I was on my best behaviour and started helping him around the house straight away. Within no time I was cooking a good feed and making tea for us both while he told me endless stories. There was no escape once he started telling stories, he would go on for hours most times.

The day after I moved in I was properly introduced to his older brother, Poppy. He was sitting in the front yard with his family, interacting with the rest of the community on the main street. I was curious to meet the respected Elder, so old TG got his attention for my introduction. 'Brother, this boy here is gonna stay with me.' Poppy didn't look over yet. 'Aw, yeah', he said slowly, acknowledging his brother. I said hello and he gave me a quick glance and said hello back. He then went on with what he was doing, without any further conversation. Old TG went on to tell Poppy that I had a job in the community and that I lived in his house. 'Aw, yeah, that's good', Poppy replied, and that was the end of our first meeting. It took a little longer for me to get to know Poppy, I had to earn his respect.

Sitting back on the porch that afternoon, like many, with old man TG, I soon learnt that there was never a dull moment in little old Laura town. There was something happening every day in the main street. You didn't need a television – there was plenty of action going on. People were coming and going all the time. Like any small town there was happiness, sadness, dramas and endless laughter that filled the little street on most days. There were a few drinks being had among some, which was the way it was in those times. But everyone was family, and I soon warmed to the town's community life.

Besides the everyday social side of the place, the best part was going to work on my new job. The Elders would go to work with us too, doing all sorts of jobs around the place. They were more or less the bosses of the whole community and workforce at that time. If you stepped out of line, you were in big trouble. It was working with them on country that allowed me to get to know them better. I worked hard with the crew and a few weeks later I was upgraded to a new job as community ranger. I still got paid the same amount of money as everyone else on four days a week, except they gave me a ranger uniform. Old TG was the head ranger and he told everyone that he was the boss. He had his uniform on all the time; he lived and breathed being a ranger and looking after country. He was so happy about my recruitment and the fact that I was now officially working under him. From that day on I went on countless adventures with them old people.

Every day we would go out bush, hunting, fishing, or collecting materials to make medicines or artefacts like woomeras (spear-throwers). We were often bringing the younger kids along or sometimes going out on our own. Those two old people, old man TG and Poppy, took me under their wing and shared their world with me. Being with them on country made me feel grateful for each and every day. The best part was being out on country most of the time, completely free from any cares. If I wasn't working then I was listening and learning about animals, plants, places or stories. We didn't just talk about it – we would eat bush tucker, craft wood into an artefact, or make medicine, just as the old people did in the old days.

I told the Elders that my grandmother came from the Tagalaka people in Croydon. They told me a story about when they were in their early twenties – they had worked over in Croydon doing cattle on one occasion. It would have been around the mid-1940s when they were over there. Old TG told me that they met an old Tagalaka man there who could also speak Kuku-Thaypan. Even though the clan groups were so far apart, they could speak each other's language. I was interested to hear such a story and the language connections all the clan groups would've had before settlement. They taught me parts of the Awu-Laya language,

refreshing their memories as they spoke in their native tongue.

It was an honour to learn from them, but it didn't come without many challenges along the way. You have to develop trust, not just with the old people, but the whole community. It took some time before the old people really started to teach me things. They also found me useful to help them out too around other life matters. The main thing they wanted was to practise culture and get back onto their country. They wanted to apply their knowledge back onto the land, the fire, the water, looking after the story places. But most of all they wanted their younger ones to learn the language and get back onto country. It was vital because the two men were the last of the Awu-Laya Elders who knew the traditional knowledge and stories of that country. They wanted the young ones to inherit the knowledge and take over their roles as leading Elders.

That proved to be challenging for them due to modern town life and the influences that came with it. The old men gave up drinking before I met them, they had finished with those days. There were many good yarns had with other Elders enjoying a brew, though. Some old characters I sat with around the camp fire were hard, old cattle men. After the conversations they would lie out on the ground and sleep with no swag at all under the stars.

Old man TG told me that he came from the days where only hard-working men were allowed to have a drink. So on occasion, after work, he would tell me to go sit with everyone and join the party. I would often contribute by bringing my six-string guitar and sing all kinds of old songs with everyone. There was never any problem getting people to sing and dance under the old shady mango trees.

Old man TG loved music, and was always happy when I pulled out the old guitar for a strum. I would play for him all the time and he loved it so much. He could play a bit as well and would pluck the strings now and then. His favourite song was 'You Are My Sunshine', so we would play that one quite often. You had to create your own fun, so music became a big part of our down time. I began teaching the drums to a young boy named Trevor. He lived with me and old TG through periods of his childhood, from a young age. I taught him how to play with two

sticks on some empty boxes and saucepans. I played songs on the guitar, and he would bash sticks on whatever we could find. Together we would make music and entertained ourselves for hours.

We began to find some rhythm, so I saved up and got an old set of second-hand drums, an amp and a microphone. We didn't have a mic stand but we used a broom handle, a chair, and some sticky tape. We started a two-man band for the Laura community and old man TG was the manager. It was his band and he called it the Laura Quinkan Country Band. We would play all night down at the local Quinkan Hotel almost every weekend. Sometimes the community would keep us playing until three in the morning, until the pub owner walks over and shuts down the main power. People danced and cheered; the whole community was so happy. We were a two-man juke box and everyone appreciated the different genres we could play: rock'n'roll, country, reggae, and even a love song here and there. Some of the punters would cry with joy and shake a leg to some tunes. Whenever Trevor played 'Wipe Out' on the drums he would make all of his Aunties cry. 'That's my son,' they would say, bursting into tears with pride. It was so much fun, jamming to a dancing community all night. It was an amazing time. Everyone was together as one – white and black, kids and adults. Life was good back then in little old Laura town.

But partying up was something I always put last on the list when it came to country and culture. I always put the old people and country first, every time, no exceptions. Every time we went bush, we would try and take the grandchildren with us, especially Dale and Lewis Musgrave. They were the two eldest grandsons of Poppy and TG. They would come out with us on trips all over the country. Poppy's youngest daughter, Eleanor, would also come along, and other younger children like Trevor, and their families. The old people were always throwing the kids in the tray of the Toyota to take them out on country. They would constantly tell the younger ones that they would take over from them one day, and they always made sure to bring them along with us whenever possible.

It wasn't long before the old fellas started talking about going down to the local schoolhouse to teach the kids. They started teaching the

Awu-Laya language and cultural lessons at the local school. We did bush tucker walks, dance, made bush humpies, started fire, and sang songs in language.

We had a regular gig at the school once a week for an hour in the afternoon. Them old people were so proud that they would tell the whole town about their little language program. I don't think we would've missed one lesson, as it was high on our agenda. I even had my own two children going to the school as well. I was raising a family through all of this too, which made things even better. Life really was good in little old Laura town.

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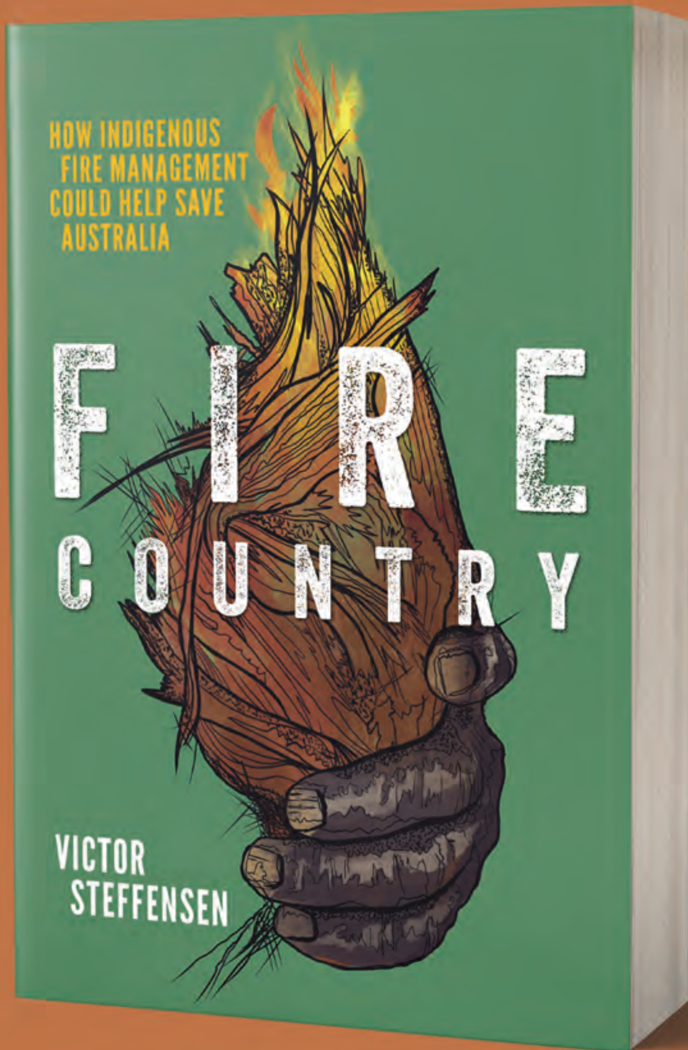

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