

**Book review****Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal men's violence against women and children****LOUIS NOWRA (2007) North Melbourne, Victoria: Pluto Press, Australia.****102 pp. ISBN 978-0-9802924-0-4****Review by JAN RICHARDSON**

This book is an exposé of horrendous physical and psychological injuries inflicted on some Aboriginal women and children, mostly by Aboriginal men. It is also a polemic strongly in favour of Aboriginal men taking action to control the behaviour of their own. Mick Gooda, former ATSIC leader, states they should 'stand up and say it's not part of our culture' (p. 91), and Nowra concurs.

Nowra is a novelist and playwright invited to contribute to the Pluto Press' series of *NOW Australia* that features 'new journalism on contemporary issues by Australia's leading writers and journalists'. His writing style and hard-hitting descriptions of incidents are vindicated by the publisher's purpose, but Nowra personalises his observations to validate interest in the issues and his bona fides with Aboriginal people. He discloses that he has 'always disliked men's physical cruelty towards women and children' (p. 3), and is driven to investigate it.

A very brief acknowledgement that misogyny is almost universal underlies Nowra's survey of Aboriginal men's behaviour, but does not divert from his central task to explore why it is prevalent in today's Aboriginal communities, why it is directed within the men's own community, whether it has its basis in traditional culture, and how it can be stopped. Through sickening evidence of alcohol-fuelled violence and sexual attacks on women, young boys and even younger girls, and references to comments by victims or Aboriginal leaders, Nowra develops his argument that drastic action is urgently needed to transform this scenario. The key to change is understanding, which seems to hinge on whether this kind of violence and sexual exploitation is justified by tradition. Nowra's interpretation of traditional culture is, however, limited by its anthropological definition. While this may be a useful discovery process, there are other aspects that may lead to a more fruitful discussion.

Both Aboriginal, and the predominantly Western culture with which contemporary Aboriginal people have to deal, need to be examined. Studying their philosophical bases can reveal how Aboriginal men can recover self-respect by gaining power in an alien culture, and Margaret Bain's research provides a start (Bain 2007). Bain illuminates the difficulties traditional Aboriginal people experience communicating with Westerners and managing their institutions, difficulties that often lead to social exclusion. This communication breakdown is influenced by a difference in world view that makes all the difference. It is hinted at in the film *Kanyini*. Bob Randall, the narrator of the film, is a member of the Mutijulu people living on their tribal land around Uluru. Randall 'tells the tale of why Indigenous people are now struggling in a modern world and what needs to be done for Indigenous people to move forward'

(<http://www.kanyini.com>). He eulogises the wisdom, strength and beauty of his people's pre-contact culture, then looks over to the tourist centre on the other side of the Rock and says enviously 'they've got everything, we've got nothing'. The view that land, cultural freedom and a strong tradition are 'nothing', and that whitefella ways are desired but cannot be obtained, is a clue to Aboriginal men's estrangement from societal institutions, and angry behaviours.

Bain shows that there are cultural features embedded in Western capitalism that deny Aboriginal people entry unless they are demystified. The crux of the dissimilarity is that the two world views are almost irreconcilable, and that as the Western capitalist system is dominant in Australia, its philosophical basis needs to be exposed and taught in order that Aboriginal people can choose whether or not to engage in it. If this clarity and choice are not offered, and learning how to use the capitalist system is not made concrete, exclusion of Aboriginal people is inevitable. Incomplete power over Western capitalistic structures is one explanation for the anger, sexual violation of young children, violence and misogynist brutality that Nowra describes. It is an explanation that warrants exploration, for it can also be seen in analyses of other cross-cultural situations. Anne Applebaum (*The Age* 25/4/07, p. 10), writing about the death of Boris Yeltsin, points to it:

Mr Yeltsin was a genuine man of transition. He knew things had to change, but he had neither the ideas nor the tools to change them. [...] He admired Western abundance but never understood how Western societies actually worked.

Last year Joseph Elu, a Torres Strait leader and head of the Federal Government's Indigenous business advisory group, was reported as saying:

The social problems are there because people are not embracing what Australia is [...] It is a capitalist democracy, so if you have a section of the community [...] who are not part of that philosophy of capitalism, of course they're going to have social problems. (ABC 17/7/06)

Instead of focussing on a possible traditional foundation for male violence, as Nowra does, it might be more useful to explore how Aboriginal men can find roles in our capitalist society. Social inclusion, and attainment of positions that bring men the kind of esteem and authority they earned when their cultural milieu was unhindered by a foreign philosophy, might promote fulfilment and reduce anger.

Nowra has been courageous in outing aspects of culture as a key to socially unacceptable behaviour. He calls on Aboriginal men to confront their actions and provide leadership to their own in changing those that are destructive to their culture and terrible for their victims. But exposure and challenge are insufficient to produce drastic change. An alternative view of culture shifts the debate not to whether traditional culture sanctioned male violence and sexual assault, but to the capacity of Aboriginal men to choose which parts of Western culture they can adopt in order to gain access to its benefits. Part of that choice might be whether that take up is permanent and complete, or simply partial, as, for example, only during work hours. The urgency for a resolution to the devastating situation that Nowra presents could lead to an examination of this aspect of cultural difference, to different choices, and to

a more rewarding use of Aboriginal male energy and traditions and, thus, the desired transformation of 'bad dreaming' to 'good dreaming'.

## **References**

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*Kanyini*: (2006) <http://www.kanyini.com>

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