



Us women, our ways, our world

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Review

The authorship of this book is certainly formidable and strong. Seventeen Aboriginal women generously sharing stories of their lives and experiences, culminating in an absorbing book with an introduction and fourteen chapters. The book, *Us Women, Our Ways, Our World* edited by Pat Dudgeon, Jeannie Herbert, Jill Milroy, and Darlene Oxenham, takes us on an emotive and moving journey deep into the lives of Aboriginal women who have been significantly impacted by past policies and practices and even to more recent accounts of living towards a better future. The stories move readers to places of resilience, whereby the women, from the journeys within their own lives, tell their stories whether narratives or academic commentaries towards places of resilience in the face of utmost adversity. Their ability to arrive at this place is a testimony of the incredible strengths that these women have within from their Indigenous positioning and knowledges.

There are commonalities throughout chapters that need to be acknowledged, firstly the families,

the elders and grandparents of which many of the authors acknowledge within their lives and who are very much a part of their stories. Secondly, that these stories are about relationships, strength and endurance. We need to acknowledge not only the editors in this instance, but also collectively all the authors for their unique contributions in presenting *Us Women, Our Ways, Our World*. The authors of the collection of stories are named in order of the chapters of the book; Darlene Oxenham, Jill Milroy, Mary Terszak, Cheryl Kickett-Tucker, Shirley Harris, Tjalamanu Mia, Mary-Ann Bin-Sallik, Joan Winch, Jeannie Herbert, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Pat Dudgeon, Irene Watson, Nerida Blair, Sandy O'Sullivan, Dawn Bessarab, Lyn Henderson-Yates, and Vanessa Lee.

The purpose of writing the book was clearly articulated in the opening sentence, "In producing this publication we, the editors, sought to acknowledge what the contributors perceived to be the particular strengths of Australia's Aboriginal women" (p. 11). The authors in entirety were Australian Aboriginal women who are uniquely credentialed in Australia across both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds to contribute to this book. The intended audience is for anyone who wishes to have a deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives and worldviews. For seventeen women writing different narratives, it is a clear collaborative effort.

I was delighted to undertake a book review of *Us Women, Our Ways, Our World*. As an Aboriginal woman, reading a book about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women by Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander women, evoked personal reactions. In committing to do the review necessitated that the book was read thoroughly in its entirety. I found that I needed to rest from reading and give myself time for reflections to gain the understandings in the literature and language within the book and its stories within. While I acknowledge the diversity within our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, most stories resonated to my own life and lives that I have lived around. Reflection time was necessary before beginning the writing of the book review, as the book held very powerful accounts of people's lives, therefore it was necessary and respectful to hold on to the stories and reflect on the emotions felt by the authors and my own emotions and reactions as the reader. The personal accounts required considered reflection, as the narratives own a very unique place in time and history. Time allowed the book to be seen in perspective and allowed thoughts to be gathered and reflections to be considered. The book was not difficult to read; however, the book was heavy with context and information, and needed suitable time to digest.

Until recently, Australian history has largely ignored Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and even then, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives about history. It is correct to state that history was written by the colonisers in public records, letters and diaries. The vanquished were not afforded opportunities to have presence and the methods of recording history have not included alternative tools, such as oral tradition, for past historical accounts. Particularly in Australia, oral histories provided Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people their historical records. Histories and perspectives such as those provided by the women in *Us Women, Our Ways, Our World*, have clearly come from discussions with family and ultimately from their groups experiences. These stories were narratives of people's lives which mean that the stories are experiential and real. The narratives communicate layers of information, inclusive of recent times and historical times. The integrity of the stories is evident throughout the entire book.

This book was certainly an essential reading both personally, and professionally, and requires that the reader takes time to reflect and critically review the content. The book powerfully delivers

the depth of the experiences of each of the women against the backdrop of racism, colonialism, and practiced genocide towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the introduction, Darlene Oxenham and Jill Milroy discuss the value of relationships within the book, in reviewing, I certainly agreed. Deep connections, enduring relationships and our responsibilities in the relationships with ourselves and the relationships with others permeate the book in its entirety.

The strengths in this collection of life accounts lives in the variety of stories of strength, of identity, of colonialism, and truth. As the authors share the life of themselves and their families, here is a view that shelter, love and good health is what most people need and want. And yet when those who are born into an environment where the natural love a child should innately have from a mother and family is absent due to colonisation or other events, the effects and impacts of the past can ripple throughout that child's life and by extension the lives of the family. The impacts of the significant disruptions between family and child can linger in the relationships we may have with others, the relationships with ourselves and the relationships thereafter with our own children. This was highlighted in the book and the impacts should never be underestimated. Yet, the authors moved through these accounts and towards the adversities they had experienced, describing the way in which they could create spaces and ways forward for themselves, their families and others around them.

All of the chapters were as equally intriguing and informative as the last. It was very difficult to choose one individual story to comment on, however I wish to acknowledge Professor Joan Winch's chapter, *Aboriginal Women and Leadership: Up Close and Personal*. Professor Winch provides a personal written account, of her and her families experiences in a matter of fact tone without using emotion laden language. Yet, her story of herself and her family evokes and invites emotion, "My mother was born in Martu Country...Because she was so young when she was removed she was not able to tell us anything about her background" (p. 69). It is clear when reading this chapter that Professor Winch has much experience with asserting her voice to be heard.

The added strengths in this biographical story is that Professor Winch generously shares her wisdom with the hope that others can learn from her experiences. “Rave About Us,” (pp. 76-77) articulates an acronym developed by Professor Winch and her daughter in 1999, after participating in an Aboriginal Women’s Leadership workshop. Professor Winch exemplifies an empowered way forward through significant and traumatic challenges in life. It could be asserted that women of all backgrounds could potentially gain something from reviewing the Rave About Us acronym. Professor Winch concludes her chapter by providing more seeds of wisdom in the areas of sexism and racism with a gentle but firm encouragement to continue to move forward within all our lives and to not give up in the face of utmost adversity.

Overall the stories reflect the necessity for continuing to build positive and meaningful relationships towards reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous peoples. This also points to the relationships between academics, researchers, writers and government. The differences in cultural interpretations, understandings of world views and even power imbalances have been barriers that impact on building robust relationships with others. The stories highlight, however, that through true reflection from within, we can certainly hold ourselves well for the relationships with ourselves and with others to develop and grow.

Conclusion

The ultimate purpose of writing such a book has certainly been achieved. The book allows for a richer deeper understanding of Australian Aboriginal women’s perspectives and what they can offer the world. The rich contribution this book makes, is significant to say the least. After a thorough search, there is a scarcity of books (particularly collection of stories) written entirely from Aboriginal women’s perspective. Therefore, this book is quite exceptional and as such, valued for the contribution it is making in its recent release in May 2017.

The writing styles of each of the authors were diverse, but all were clear and articulate in the content they were discussing. The book does raise a hidden discussion and hidden issues for

reflection. **Now that we have this information and knowledges from reading these stories, what can we do individually and collectively moving forward? What can we take away from reading these stories?**

I felt that an extensive conclusion would have enhanced the book. As an Indigenous person reviewing this book, it was felt, that the implications of the stories were certainly powerful, and meaningful. I felt that, further information in the form of a powerful conclusion (similar to the introduction) would help us all to have deeper summations of the book.

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