

the politicisation of the public service in Australia's States and Territories. It will be interesting to see if Julia Gillard's promised climate change is as far-reaching as it needs to be.

REVIEWED BY

Professor Chris Goddard

Director

National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse  
Monash University

REFERENCE

Franklin, M. & Lunn, S. (2008) 'Critics in "climate of fear": Gillard', *The Australian*, 29 January, p.1.

BAD DREAMING

Louis Nowra

Pluto Press, Australia. 102pp.

*Bad Dreaming* is one of the publications in the *Now Australia* series from Pluto Press. The blurb inside the back cover describes this 'refreshing series' as 'unashamedly about how we live now', and states that it features 'new journalism on contemporary issues'. The authors are 'story tellers occupying the space where literature meets journalism meets politics,' and using 'writers of imagination, skill, experience and profile. *NOW* will always entertain ...'

Other issues include Murray Hogarth on climate change, and Joanna Mendelsohn on public versus private schools (there is an embarrassing typo in the advertisement for this one: 'Beyond public vs public' should surely read 'Beyond public vs private', but then accuracy has often been a casualty of immediacy). Australia needs more debate about such issues and Pluto Press is to be congratulated on the contribution these small books make.

Turning to Nowra's contribution, there can be few books that have been caught up in events as rapidly as *Bad Dreaming*. On the 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2007, Louis Nowra appeared on ABC TV *Lateline* to promote publication of the book the next day. Only weeks later, on 30<sup>th</sup> April, an advance copy of the report of the Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse was provided as 'a courtesy' to the Northern Territory Government. This was done so that they 'had time to consider the report and prepare advice on key actions before the report was made public' (Northern Territory Government media release 2007).

On 15<sup>th</sup> June, the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory released the report, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle, Little Children are Sacred* (Wild & Anderson 2007), calling it 'a landmark report' that exposes 'great pain and unhappiness' in the media release (Martin 2007). On the same day, the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister at the time, Mal Brough, stated on ABC *News Radio* that 'This is a

national disgrace, it's a disaster and it's something that should never happen in this country' (ABC News 2007).

Less than one week later, on 21<sup>st</sup> June, Mal Brough launched the 'National emergency response to protect Aboriginal children in the NT' (Brough 2007). The measures included alcohol restrictions, welfare reforms, school attendance measures, 'compulsory health checks', acquiring townships, banning x-rated pornography, and increased policing (Brough 2007). The story has run in most papers on most days ever since, and towards the end of August, the NT government released its response (Northern Territory Government 2007).

Nowra's book sets out to ask why Australia has made so little effort to stop what the cover describes as a 'terrifying epidemic of male Aboriginal sexual and domestic violence against women and children', and why the efforts that have been made have been unsuccessful.

Nowra starts by paying tribute to a number of books – for example, Judy Atkinson's *Trauma Trails* (2002) – and several journalists, including Paul Toohy. He then shares some of his own experiences as a victim of what would now be called child abuse, as his mother and 'her third husband fought loudly and violently'. As he notes, at that time 'nothing much was done about domestic and sexual violence' (Nowra 2007:2).

Since the 1980s, Nowra has been collecting newspaper clippings on Aboriginal cultural conflict. The stories include pack rapes and arranged marriages. The accounts, however, are not merely newspaper stories: Nowra worked with a range of Aboriginal people and many described widespread sexual abuse. He visited outback communities and was disgusted by the violence he saw against Aboriginal women:

The violence was public and astonishingly brutal. Some of the women's faces ended up looking as though an incompetent butcher had conducted plastic surgery with a hammer and saw. The fear in the women's eyes reminded me of dogs whipped into cringing submission (2007:6).

The stories that prompted the book are described: the 50-year-old (already convicted of killing his wife) who was sentenced to 24 hours in prison for unlawful intercourse with a 15-year-old girl promised to him as his next wife; and the man who anally-raped a 14-year-old girl and who was sentenced to detention for the court sitting only.

Cultural traditions' are used 'to literally get away with rape and murder': Aboriginal boys are ten times more likely to be sexually assaulted than boys in the general population and the sexual abuse of girls is so widespread that one-third of thirteen-year-old girls in the Northern Territory are infected with chlamydia and gonorrhoea (2007:7).

Nowra feared that media interest in these stories would be temporary, and that the issues would not be addressed:

... even as I write this, it is difficult to find anything in the media about this topic. As usual, the issue has faded from the public consciousness (2007:8).

Media interest in indeed fickle, but as I complete this review, *The Australian* has another full page devoted to this issue (see, for example, Rothwell 2007). Nowra must be so delighted to be so wrong.

Chapter Two catalogues the early dismay of British and French 'explorers and adventurers' (2007:11) at the harsh treatment of women:

Despite local variations, there is a consistent pattern of Aboriginal men's treatment of women that was harsh, sexually aggressive (gang-rape, for instance) and, in our term, misogynist. Given its pervasive nature across the whole of Australia, we can say it was ancient and long-lasting (2007:24).

The story of 'white settlement' is the subject of Chapter Three and the 'dystopian quality of some Aboriginal communities' is central to Chapter Four (2007: 25-57). Chapter Five provides Nowra's context:

If anything has been common to humankind across the world and across time it has been the subjugation of women. They have been killed, beaten, humiliated, rejected, raped and made to feel physically and psychologically inferior to men (2007:59).

Then there are stories of courage, and tales of triumph, in the face of apparently overwhelming odds, but the harsh data are apparently unavoidable: in Queensland, 'indigenous children are up to 45 times more likely to be admitted to hospital for assault', and in NSW in 2000 just over a quarter of all children in the care of the State were indigenous (2007:81).

The choice of the Chekhov quote at the beginning of *Bad Dreaming* is an interesting one:

A writer must be objective as a chemist ... he must know that evil passions are as inherent in life as good ones (2007:v).

The version I found on *Google* was rather different:

To a chemist there is nothing impure on earth. The writer should be just as objective as the chemist; he should liberate himself from everyday subjectivity and acknowledge that manure piles play a highly respectable role in the landscape and that evil passions are every bit as much a part of life as good ones.

There are differences and missing 'manure piles'. As always in child abuse, what is missing might be important.

Noel Pearson, of course, is present in this book. How could he not be? Pearson's belief, that the circumstances in many communities are not just a consequence of poverty but also a

cause (see, for example, Cape York Institute 2007), connects with research in a very different community (Frederick & Goddard 2007).

Nowra could not have imagined the events that followed the publication of his book. Federal Government intervention on this scale was unimaginable just months ago. A sense of suspicion surrounds those actions and demonstrates the highly controversial and political nature of child protection. The influence of an imminent general election could not be ignored either.

To read and review a book like this is a privilege. It is to be part of an important debate and the timing, as noted above, meant that events were unfolding as I read. This is not a book that you read alone. Colleagues have shared their views. One 'borrowed' it for the night and stayed up to the early hours reading it straight through. Australia needs more interest in child welfare and child protection, and a great deal more investigative journalism of this kind.

REVIEWED BY

Professor Chris Goddard  
Director  
National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse  
Monash University

## REFERENCES

- ABC News (2007) Indigenous child abuse a national disgrace, says Brough, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/06/15/1952739.htm>>
- Atkinson, J. (2002) *Trauma Trails*, North Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Cape York Institute (2007) *From hand out to hand up: Cape York welfare reform project: Design recommendations*, Cairns: Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.
- Frederick, J. & Goddard, C. (2007) 'Exploring the relationship between poverty, childhood adversity and child abuse from the perspective of adulthood', *Child Abuse Review*, 16(5):323-341.
- Martin, C. (2007) Inquiry Report: Media release, 15<sup>th</sup> June' <<http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/ocn/media/index.cfm?fuseaction=ViewReleased&id=2711&d=5>>
- Northern Territory Government (2007) *Closing the gap of Indigenous disadvantage: Generational plan of action*, <[http://www.action.nt.gov.au/at\\_a\\_glance/](http://www.action.nt.gov.au/at_a_glance/)>
- Northern Territory Government (2007) Media release 2007: Child abuse enquiry findings released, 15<sup>th</sup> June, <[http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysacc/media\\_release.html](http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysacc/media_release.html)>
- Rothwell, N. (2007) 'Her velvet glove to his iron fist', *Australian*, 21<sup>st</sup> August, p. 4.
- Wild, R. & Anderson, P. (2007) *Ampe Akelyermemane Meke Mekane 'Little Children are Sacred': Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*, Darwin: Northern Territory Government.