

Book Review

Saltwater. An Epic Fight for Justice in the Tropics

Cathy McLennan. Publisher: University of Queensland Press, Year of publication: 2016, ISBN 978 0 7022 5383, 6–315 pages. RRP \$32.95AUS

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From the very beginning, the author of this book locates Australian Aboriginal children in regional Australia as highly vulnerable in a society with many structural deficits. This book challenges readers to ponder how calls for tighter criminal justice controls sit starkly when empathy, care and accountability for system failures would seem to be more obvious solutions.

The setting is North Queensland, with a focus on Palm Island.

The author, a Queensland Magistrate with more than 20 years of experience as a criminal lawyer, details some of the tragic cases she has dealt with in circumstances in which children who came before the Court were located in a ‘world skewed against them’ (p. 89).

The narratives begin from her days as a new law graduate employed with Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Legal Service. Shocked at what she perceived as structural inadequacies and injustices, in this book, the author wanted to let the reader see some of the overwhelming issues through her eyes in order that readers gain a better understanding – so ‘real solutions can be found’ (p. 310).

The book details the shocking disadvantage impacting on the lives of some of her clients, including the frail and malnourished *Olivia*, a child with signs of foetal alcohol syndrome. Olivia has experienced severe abuse and neglect, and at ‘eleven is no bigger than a five year old’. Yet before the court she is ‘deemed a menace’ to the Palm Island community, she ‘continues to steal’, and she faces charges of ‘prostituting herself’. For these crimes, the prosecutor ‘calls for a prison sentence’ (pp. 94–95).

Other cases are equally shocking, tales of neglected, hungry children with difficult family circumstances who were

expelled from school and not long afterwards are charged with murder. The author describes the local watch house and detention centre as full of Aboriginal children who are seen by some as beyond help and merely treading the well-worn path to adult prison. The enormity of her caseload appears to convey a system that will remain mired in desperation without legal and political will for new structural answers. Reinforcing the imagery of inevitability, the author describes a hallway scene outside the Children’s Court as ‘packed with people standing like cows in a slaughter yard, white and black together’ (p. 207).

One element of the author’s writing style that I thought seemed unnecessary concerns some verbal expressions attributed to characters, and some descriptions of characters in the book. For example, throughout the book the author described how the aforementioned Olivia, and others, would call to the author whenever they saw her. In the book, they excitedly called out ‘Caffey’. I wondered why this could not be written as ‘Cathy’ rather than drawing the reader’s attention to the pronunciation as if to somehow mock them, even if somewhat affectionately. Elsewhere the author describes one male client as ‘the yellow-eyed . . . schizophrenic I represented a while ago in court’ (p. 141).

Nevertheless, with such shortcomings noted, I praise the author for her work for justice for her clients. This book is a compelling read and I recommend it to professionals involved in child protection and juvenile justice, and those whose brief it is to promote the health and wellbeing of children and families. It appears to be a useful reality check on the lives of many children caught up in the child protection and juvenile justice systems.