

Roberta Sykes (p.132) points out that many Aboriginal children are malnourished and have lower educational standards than Europeans. Although they tend to be good linguists, they also suffer from the 'tall-poppy' prejudices against high achievers! Alf Bamblett (p.150) and Lola Edwards (p.154) highlight effective advocacy programs for Aboriginal children.

Margaret Hamson (p.119) considers methodological problems of research into children's issues, and Bill Guy (p.109) delivers a hopeful essay on the media's acceptance of responsibilities

to Article 17, citing a campaign by the *Adelaide Advertiser* to encourage young writers to highlight concrete issues raised by the Convention.

Finally, in perhaps the most perceptive and visionary essay in the whole collection, Patricia Harris (p.102) emphasises that the Convention is for the benefit of **all** children. Therefore, young people themselves must be involved in decision making. While she is pessimistic in the face of growing economic inequality and the dominance of a political élite committed to individualism (p.105), she presents a vision of a society in

which children are not merely regarded as worthy of special protection, but are accorded the dignity of some political influence.

This collection is required reading for a all who legislate for, raise, educate or make decisions on children. It should be read by children themselves. In other words, it is essential reading for all Australians.

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Fathers edited by Jodie Kewley and Hannah Lewis

Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1993. 212pp. \$16.95

Kewley and Lewis's book, *Fathers*, is a collection of sixteen short reflections by Australian men on being fathers. These men talk openly and freely about some of the joys, frustrations, challenges and rewards that fatherhood has brought them. It is an eminently readable book, spiced with a variety of interesting, unusual and often amusing accounts, such as the following:

My eyes have been removed and I have plastic inserts which I sometimes take out at night to give my eye-sockets a rest. Daniel has been curious to discover why everyone else's eyes don't come out also. When I take my eyes out at night, I place them in a glass of saline solution. One morning, the boys were helping me to squeeze the oranges for our breakfast juice. As I was pouring it into glasses, I forgot that the glass containing my eyes was nearby. As I happily poured the juice, Gerard became quite agitated and said "Don't pour the juice into that glass Daddy. I don't want mine with eyes in it!" (pp87-88)

I have chosen to open this review of *Fathers* with the above amusing yet trivial account since it encapsulates what, for me, is my central difficulty with the book - it is a pleasant, easy-to-read book which does not add, in any substantial way, to our knowledge about fathers and fathering. This would be fine had not the editors made claims for *Fathers* beyond that of producing an amusing 'light' read. As justification for the absence of any theoretical perspect-

ive or analytical frame of reference for organising and illuminating the personal accounts, the editors 'noticed that neither bookshops nor libraries offered material on [fatherhood] - a strong contrast to the shelves full of books about motherhood.'

Now, whilst Demos's (1982) lament that 'fatherhood has a very long history but virtually no historians' remains true, it is also true that in recent times, a great deal **has** been written about fathers in the Australian context. For example, two of the fathers interviewed by Kewley and Lewis were sole parents, about which this reviewer has himself undertaken extensive published research, as well as documenting a significant history of earlier published research about single fathers. Given the literature and research that **does** exist, it seems a shame that, to use their own words, Kewley and Lewis 'merely provided a vehicle through which these men could express themselves' (p.5). Despite their limited, and some might say post modern, intentions, themes do emerge from the text that could have been illuminated by reference to relevant literature and research.

On the one hand, the text identifies clearly many of the relationship building, communication and daily living skills necessary for effective fathering. There is a real danger, however, of these being lost or, worse, dismissed, when no effort is made to isolate and disengage them from the text for separate reflection and analysis. Indeed, concluding

comments by interviewees such as: 'the person who receives [a] child with his heart can do no wrong' (p.151) or 'You never learn to be a father. No one does. Sometimes you're on, sometimes you're off. It's just part of life, isn't it?' (p.191) suggest that nothing can be learned, nor skills acquired, to assist one in effective fathering. The lack of any analysis leads the editors inevitably to the position that 'we do not feel there are enough common threads for us to draw any general conclusions'. Sadly, they can only then offer the reader the rather trite comment that 'all fathers interviewed seemed genuinely to love their children and were enriched by being fathers...' (p.5).

The second major difficulty I have with *Fathers* has to do with the selection of interviewees. The editors claim to have included 'fathers from a diverse range of backgrounds, occupations, financial situations and type of families' (p.3) and that their 'intention was to give voice to a broad cross-section of men' (p.5). The latter they have certainly not achieved. Two men, Tim Watson and Angry Anderson, were obviously included with an eye to the sales market. The group of fathers chosen for inclusion in the book are far from representative or 'ordinary' as claimed. At least half the group have tertiary qualifications for example. Nine of the sixteen are in their early to mid forties (the oldest being forty-eight). One consequence of this, of course, is that very few of these now have adolescent children

and the reflections are heavily biased towards the fathering of infants and young children. As a father myself of late adolescent children, it is therefore with a wry smile and a grain of salt that I read regularly recurring comments like the following:

I've always loved children... I think I love them because they accept you without question. You can be as rotten a person as you like and they'll still love you. (p.95)

The lack of representativeness of the interview group is further highlighted by the inclusion of only one father who is definitely of non Anglo-Celtic descent. More seriously however, is the lack of any recognition of non-

custodial fatherhood, a status which affects ever-increasing numbers of men and for which appropriate norms are uncertain, and social roles highly problematic. The book cover suggests that relationships between fathers and their children are mainly, if not solely, warm and cuddly affairs. Conveniently put aside by the editors are the alternative realities experienced by many fathers and their children - realities in part characterised by violence or indifference or sadness or frustration that result from parental separation and divorce, dominant patriarchal norms and social structures, and proprietorial and economic rationalist notions about children.

Reference

Demos J. (1982) 'The changing faces of fatherhood: A new exploration in American family history' in Cath S., Gurwitt A. & Ross J. (eds) *Father and Child: Development and clinical perspectives*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

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