

# BOOK REVIEWS

**Drusilla Modjeska, *The Mountain*. Vintage Books, Random House, Australia; 2012.**

The recent Book, *The Mountain*, by Australian Drusilla Modjeska, author of eight other books, will be of interest to ex-PNG missionaries, and to other expatriates from PNG, and missionaries to other countries such as Timor Leste, and South Africa and even to missionaries among our own Aboriginal Australians.

I found it that way, especially as I am an older missionary prone to reminiscing on the ‘times and tides’ in my missionary life and the ‘tides and times’ of the histories of the countries in which I have served. In looking at the drama in the lives of others (especially University types), at their hopes, fears and times of disillusion *etc*, I can see similar motions in my own heart and memory.

I take it as axiomatic that revolutionaries in any countries do not necessarily make good Governments, as witnessed by the post-revolutionary histories of the above named countries. Such seems also to be the case in other countries presently in stages of revolution and reconstruction.

This book will bring vividly to life the processes operating in PNG over the 30-40 years from about Independence to the present day. This is done with flair with reference to the peoples and cultures of that country. These cultures and these people are givens that impose themselves upon any temporary visitors or long term stayers, such as missionaries, alike.

The book tells the story of the Mountain (as a symbol of any part of PNG) and through a long term dynasty type treatment of ‘one’ family, immersed partly in the academic world of the University of Port Moresby, at Waigani, and on the other hand immersed partly in the clans of one particular place near Collingwood Bay, East of Pependetta. ‘One’ family is some-

thing of a mis-nomer as it is almost impossible, even at the close of reading, and with a keen focus on the many characters who populate the pages, to determine exactly the true (‘blood’) relationship of the key characters: particularly Aaron, the *hapkas* and Rika, his surrogate mother (?).

Putting this aside, the book does immerse the reader in the customs and cultures, and feeling for place from Port Moresby (mainly Waigani) to Pependetta to the Mountain and the Fjord coast above Collingwood Bay: microcosms of the whole PNG story. Tribal elders, academics, trawler-men, lumber getters, villagers, justice seekers, government officials, Kiaps, ‘*wantoks*’, environmentalists, ‘*rascals*’—all jostle together with the youth, old and wise women, and children of the clans. It’s at least colourful.

Long term relationships with Australia are explored:

Don’t be fooled, you are students well able to understand the history of colonialism and the complexity of this moment. Our relationship with Australia is changing, not ending, and we must understand why and how. If nothing else, understand this: Australia will always play this place of ours to its advantage, which right now is to recast its relationship with Asia. p.178.

That could have been written about our relationships in 2013—the PNG ‘Solution’—not 1975! 1942! 1883!

Personal agency and loss are dwelt upon, societal change illustrated:

Milton (a University lecturer), tells the story (to a local middle-grade teacher) of a student of average ability who became rich and sent his son, also of average ability to Martyrs, where Milton had him for Literature. He was a lazy boy who never read the text and who copied the essays from other students. He was no better in other classes, and one day Milton took him for long walk along the road, spoke to him

about the riches of literature and the possibilities of life ahead. To no avail. When he failed the year, his politician father arrived at the school waving a fistful of notes, demanding the that boy's teachers, including Milton, give a distinction to his lazy bully of a son, who boasted that he need do nothing, for his future did not depend on his grades. Milton talked to his father of the Literature they had read together in class and the life lessons it had taught. The father didn't remember. Everything he had learned in literature had been a waste of time, of no used to anyone. Literature doesn't make money. Look at you, he said to Milton and Milton nodded! (p. 381)

*Touche!*

Questions are asked which, for me, unlock questions of my own heart about my motivation and the effectiveness of my missioning:

Sitting there, she sees the link she'd missed, the uncomfortable truth that connects her to her fellow travellers, and then and now: We used a different language, she thinks, but were no different, all of us who came with 'dreams of things longed for' and hearts to be unlocked? The fact that we wrapped our dreams as gifts and offered them in the spirit of service, or dressed as research, or Art or Film, (or religion!) doesn't make them any less potent or greedy or blind. Weren't our dreams driven by some hidden something inside ourselves? Our own covetousness. Our own lack of ground, our dissatisfaction with where we came from. Our emptiness, perhaps. (p.390)

Answers to post-today's questions about 'Where to from here?' are hinted at. I liked its comment on discrimination:

Its easy enough for you, she says to Martha, living in Sydney, to buy the liberal version. Easy enough to say that all these cultural manifestations are equally valid, equally important. It's another form of racism to say it's fine if a young man dies for a cultural belief that wilfully prefers witchcraft over medical science. Is that what Martha wants? For us to say, fine, you go one believing the world is flat and the stars are made from the souls of dead ancestors and we will say you are just as right as anyone else, and in the meantime those who have good resources will reap the rewards of your ignorance and

make off with your resources. If we are not to become another post-colonial casualty, more of a post-colonial casualty, we have to *discriminate*. (Emphasis original) (p. 394)

I found it a hard book to 'get into' for its first 50 pages and a long enough read at 436 pages. Its style of writing, like the country and people it writes of, can be strange, disconcerting, and off-putting, and to me, the English expression does not flow, but often spurts out staccato fashion:

The government, is like a big bird, a bird that comes from somewhere else. It's not a bird that knows this land, and when it comes to lay its eggs, the bird can't get a grip upon the earth- it doesn't know how to grip this soil, doesn't know mountain, or fjord or swamp; it knows nothing of where to put an egg. So when the eggs come, they lie *nabaut, nabaut*, some in grassland where they are taken by bad men, *raskol* men, who make off with them. Some land in the forest and when the chick pecks its way out, it doesn't know where it is. Or people find it on the way to the garden, and they take it home to their village, and it grows there like a large and stupid child, knocking things over and cutting the wrong wood, planting the wrong seed. It sets up quarrels among the clans when no one can agree what to do with this big, clumsy creature. (original emphasis) (p.395)

The power of story! I recommend it to you.

—Vince Carroll MSC

**Rosalind Bradley (ed.), *A World of Prayer. Spiritual Leaders, Activists, and Humanitarians Share Their Favourite Prayers*. Orbis books. Maryknoll, New York 10545. 2013. pp.228 ISBN 976-1-62698-031-0 (pbk) \$29.95.**

Anyone who has the uneasy feeling that she is the only labourer in the vineyard, will be encouraged by this book. It is full of them. They (about 110) are the most wonderfully constructive lot. They are into just about everything: patching up civilians caught in the crossfire of Middle Eastern Wars, promoting democratic, pluralist, tolerant Islam in South East Asia, running a school on the Daly River

in the remote Northern Territory—give some idea of their work.

Life hasn't been easy for many of them. Working for marginalised country women in Papua New Guinea, Monica Jeddah Otto writes 'My officers have stood by me as I struggled to generate income for them' p.86. Not that they were expecting things to be easy: 'The Christian faith has never taught that life will be a bed of roses. What it proves is that we shall be given bread for the journey and that we never travel alone.' p.144.

The book is composed of brief biographies and prayers followed by a commentary for men and women, some famous like Hans Kung, John Shelby Spong, Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Rowan Williams, but most of them are not. There are Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus and Christians. What they have in common are service and prayer, although it is somewhat unclear whether the Buddhists are praying, exactly.

The editor, Rosalind Bradley, a convert from Judaism to Catholicism who lives in Sydney, has done an excellent job collecting this material.

There are some magnificent prayers, for example this one by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois

'Mighty causes are calling us—the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty—all these and more. But they call with voices that mean work and sacrifice and death. Mercifully grant us, O God, the spirit of Esther, that we say: I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish. Amen.' p.75.

The following is not so much a prayer as a reflection on spiritual practice, by Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, AM, on the Daly River, Northern Territory:

'Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We wait on God too. His time is the right time. We wait for him to make his word clear to us' p185.

There are deep springs within each of us, she comments, and within this deep spring is

a sound, the Word of God.

Words of wisdom abound in this small book. Amina Wadud, an emeritus professor of Islamic Studies who has lived in five countries, including Egypt and Indonesia, and who has traveled to more than forty others as an international consultant on Islam, writes 'there is a collective human need for guidance in attaining truth, forgiveness, and mercy' p.189. How right she is!

There is much in common between these prayers from diverse backgrounds. Together they constitute a kind of communion of saints.

—Reg Naulty

### BOOKS RECEIVED

Anne Elvey, Carol Hogan, Kim Power and Claire Renkin (Eds.), *Reinterpreting the Eucharist. Explorations in Feminist Theology and Ethics*, Equinox Publishing Ltd., Sheffield, 2013, ISBN 978-1-84553-771-5, \$90.00.

Diane Strevens, *Exploring Theology Together. A History of the Catholic Institute of Theology Auckland, 1889-2012*, Accent Publications, Auckland, 2012, ISBN 978-0-9922485-0-5, \$25.00.

Adrian Lyons SJ, *The First Thing To Do Is Live. Essays Sacred and Secular*, David Lovell Publishing, Melbourne, 2013, ISBN 9781863551472, \$24.95.

Angela Coco, *Catholics, Conflicts and Choices. An Exploration of Power Relations in the Catholic Church*, Acumen Publishing Ltd, Durham, 2013, ISBN 978-1-84465-651-6, \$99.95.

Eugene Stockton, *Landmarks. A Spiritual Search in a Southern Land*, Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, Lawson NSW, Revised Edn., 2013, ISBN 978-0-646-91021-5, \$15.00.