Book review


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In *Holding Men*, McCoy explores issues central to the Indigenous men of the Western Desert region. Issues of masculinity, of grief, of illness, and how these relate to Kalyirninpa (holding, nurturing, teaching, growing-up, respect). Though specifically about that region, *Holding Men* has crucial implications for the whole of Australia.

For nearly forty years Brian McCoy has lived and worked with Indigenous communities, mostly in the Western Desert, and from this depth of experience and from his PhD research about the health and well-being of Aboriginal men, comes this extraordinary book. It is a book about an ancient culture and its people, trying in their own way, to survive in 21st century Australia. Rigorously researched yet simply written, it challenges us with human stories of heart-breaking enormity whilst reflecting a quiet hope in resilience and healing of kalyirninpa.

There are many profound insights in this book, which come from years of respectful relationships and deep reflection. Kalyirninpa points a way forward, a way out of the nightmarish day to day tragedies of disease and ill-health among Indigenous Australians, because it involves ‘a proper looking after’.

Three chapters in particular situate serious current issues for Indigenous communities, particularly men, within the embrace of Kalyirninpa: ‘Petrol sniffing: More than a risk’; Football: More than a game; Prison: more than a holiday’. As McCoy puts it: ‘From the perspective of kanyirninpa these socially significant spaces (petrol sniffing, Australian Rules and prison) can offer men both healthy outcomes and unhealthy risks’. My own meaning making around those ‘spaces’ was deeply challenged and enriched with constructive alternatives.

The key Puntu (Aboriginal) values, of ngarra (land), walytja (family) and tjukurrpa (ancestral dreaming) are represented as ‘continually dynamic and inter-relating’ and kanyirninpa provides the balance for creative tension between relatedness and autonomy, on
the one hand and nuturance and authority, on the other. McCoy manages to maintain a similar
balance in his book.

Juxtaposed to his deeply sensitive, respectful, inculturated research - in the tradition of de
Nobili or Matteo Ricci - is his empathy and compassion for those affected by the personal
tragedies associated with petrol sniffing, alcohol abuse, a prison sentence or premature death.

McCoy’s insights are profound and he is able to articulate them in a very clear way. His
rolling narrative at time has the feel of a foreign correspondent in a battle zone. This is a
silent ‘battle zone’, and arguably the most important moral battle ground in Australia today.

_Holding Men_ is also a challenging resource for policy makers in the area of Indigenous health
and well-being, precisely because it is the antithesis of armchair philosophising and
moralising. It is deeply respectful and mindful (and heartful), of traditional values and
customs (eg ‘Sorry Business’) and offers a key to understanding the links between life and
death, mourning and celebration, health and disease, for Western Desert Indigenous people.

McCoy manages to move through this difficult terrain with the sure-footedness of an ancient
Aboriginal tracker and a confidence founded on years of sitting, listening, observing and
quietly healing. Reading the book is at times like sitting in on a conversation under a Boab
tree. Brian McCoy is a healer who carries his wisdom quietly. The ethical dilemmas and
questions are addressed with integrity, humanity, respect and truthfulness, with no attempt at
glib answers.

This is an important book, written in a lucid thoughtful way that leads us step by step through
what is, for most of us, foreign land on Australian soil. In particular _Holding Men_ lets us feel
the impact on Indigenous boys and young men, no longer being held by the land, by their
elders, more and more autonomous and physical and psychological peril, adrift from their
traditions, lands and culture.

_Holding Men_ is about being wounded but it is also about being resilient and the possibility or
hope of building that resilience in others, both individually and in community, through
_kalyirrinpa._

The Indigenous artwork is riveting, confronting and evocative, with many paintings
graphically illustrating the stories of young Aboriginal men and the spaces they find
themselves in.

The Spirit of Christmas is fully alive and well in _Holding Men._

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