

From the Kitchen

24 March 2010



Recently, sitting here at my kitchen table, dog prostrate at my feet, I have spent quiet days immersing myself in *Etchings Indigenous: Black and Sexy*, a project from [Ilura Press](#). I've read it through several times and contemplated the stories, poems, interviews, reviews, photography and art, trying to get my head and heart around it all in order to write a review. It has not been easy.

Normally, when reviewing a novel or a collection of short stories, I read it from cover to cover and write about my impressions, about the language used, how well it communicates, etc. *Etchings Indigenous* gave me a very different experience and an impetus to dig deeper.

In the reading of the collection and then in the writing of the review, I was very aware of my non-Aboriginality, even of my status as one of the invaders – a 1955 immigrant from Europe. Even sitting here in a comfortable house makes me an 'other' in relation to some of the contributors to the book.

I've written previously [1] about the question of my writing a story as if I were a young abused woman in a mental hospital, or as a man who is physically challenged. I am neither of these. Trying to review a collection of works by Aboriginal writers and artists requires a similar stepping out of who I am. Yet, at the same time, to be honest in the reviewing, I need to speak from my experience, knowledge and understanding as a non-Aborigine. After all, the gathering and publishing of this collection must have partly had the goal of bringing this work to a non-Aboriginal audience, as well as, perhaps, helping the contributors find a voice and a wider audience.

I concluded in contemplating all this and in writing the review that it is our shared humanity that allows us to make any sense of what was being presented. It is this shared humanity that allows us to have any understanding of another, to feel any empathy and to make any meaningful connection with them. We do not need to have experienced what they experienced in order to have that understanding and to make that connection. If that were not the case, if we could only empathise and understand out of identical experiences, empathy and understanding would become unnecessary and meaningless.

I guess (and it can only be a guess) that people mistreat others when something gets in the way of or overwhelms this essential shared humanity. Such things would include greed, fear, anger or sheer malice. My understanding of the interactions of early, mostly European, settlers in this country, is that much of the mistreatment of the original inhabitants came out of a failure to understand the land, coupled with a fear of the strangeness of it. A lot of effort went into trying to make it look like home – the places they sailed from. There was greed inherent in the idea that land, in large measure, could be fenced and owned in order to make individuals wealthy. There was pure misunderstanding in the conclusion that absence of towns and villages and livestock and acres of tilled land meant that the Aborigines felt no connection with the land. Lack of ownership (in the European sense of title) was equated

with lack of connection. (In fact, there *are* records of some Aborigines expressing ‘ownership’ of an area of land. [2]) Where Europeans did come across substantial villages of substantial stone houses, these were often destroyed to get rid of an uncomfortable reality that was inconsistent with the notion of an aimless and nomadic people who would be as happy over there as here. Similarly the destruction of Aboriginal agriculture and aquaculture. [3]

Reviewing, as I’ve said elsewhere [4], is a perilous undertaking. The reviewer can utterly destroy a writer or artist by careless use of ill-considered words, or through their malicious use. I see the reviewer’s task as trying to understand a work and then to bring that understanding to a potential audience. If a reviewer doesn’t like something in the work (or if s/he does), it is incumbent on the reviewer to give some reason, in such a way that anyone reading the review is best able to make some informed decision about whether to bother reading or viewing the work in question. The reviewer might go a little further, if s/he is capable of doing so, and give the reader of the review some insights, information and understanding that can enrich the subsequent reading or viewing of the work.

For this reason, I find writing a review more difficult than writing a story or poem. When writing for entertainment I do my best, for I write as much for myself as for a potential audience. If *they* don’t like it, that’s a shame but of little consequence to anyone. On the other hand, if I’m careless or lazy in the writing of a review, there may be consequences for the reader as well as the producer of the original work. Yes, there will be consequences when I am careful and diligent, but they will be consequences of, or despite of, my honesty and hard work.

In reviewing *Etchings Indigenous*, I sat here and penned a number of drafts and rewrote whole slabs a number of times, because I felt a responsibility to be especially careful, given the greater possibility of misunderstandings – mine of the original work and the readers’ of the review. Given my current level of understanding of the issues, I’m sure I would write a different review of the same collection in a year’s time. All I can do is be honest where I sit now.

1. [From the Kitchen #41](#)
2. See for instance *Australians, Vol I* (pages 405-407) by Thomas Keneally; [Allen & Unwin](#), 2009
3. See [Convincing Ground](#) by Bruce Pascoe; Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007
4. for instance in [From the Kitchen #16](#)