



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Dick Roughsey. *The Giant Devil-Dingo*. Collins, Sydney, 1973.
34 pp. \$3.95.

Peter Bell,
High School, Aspley,
Brisbane, Q'ld.

All previous reviews in this journal have dealt with scholarly, professional background works. This is the first to comment on a resource book - one that is useful reading material for the learner in the Aboriginal primary school.

The name of Dick Roughsey will be familiar to most Australians interested in Aboriginal affairs or the arts. His previous publication, *Moon and Rainbow* (Reed, 1971), was the first book substantially written by an Aboriginal Australian. A Lardil man from Langu-Narnji near Mornington Island, Dick is an accomplished painter in the bark-ground style of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The people of the Gulf, an important area in the visual and performing arts, have been fortunate in retaining their cultural integrity and dignity to a high degree. From this milieu, Dick has made a successful transition to the art forms of white Australia. He is a recognized painter, showing the influence of Percy Trezise in his landscapes, and owing something to Ray Crooke in the statuesque, immobile figures of his paintings.

Out of this background comes a highly successful book. It tells a story of the Cape York Peninsula in direct, simple language, accompanied by Dick's own paintings (generously reproduced as double-page colour prints) of the events described. The dreamtime story tells how Gaiya, the giant devil-dingo pet of Eelgin, the grasshopper woman, chased the butcher-bird brothers across North Queensland. After a monumental chase, the brothers ambushed and killed Gaiya in a narrow gorge. His remains were used by the wizard Woodbarl to create man's ecological partner of the later age - the much-maligned dingo.

The book is genuinely entertaining to the adult reader. There is the visual spectacle of the immense red-eyed Gaiya loping across the plain, and the verbal exchange at the ambush scene when the skittish younger brother prepares to spear first the tongue, then the head of Gaiya, but is constrained by the older brother to wait for the body to appear. The landscapes are authentic Cape York Peninsula - the ancient conglomerate and sandstone escarpments of Quinkan Country.

One adverse comment, directed at the publisher. The symmetrical composition of many scenes means that a crucial element of some plates vanishes into the spine of the book. When demand warrants a second printing, a more appropriate method of binding is required.

The main point is that this is the first time an Aboriginal story has been published by an Aboriginal writer. That fact alone deserves attention. Being written and illustrated by the same hand adds to the strength of the book. It has a matter-of-fact quality which has been missing in previously published Aboriginal stories. I suspect that this book may appeal to Aboriginal children where others have failed, since it is difficult for a white author to tell such a story without descending into sentimentality. This story is told in intelligent, living, unselfconscious language:

"Away off in Dreamtime, old Eelgin the grasshopper woman and Gaiya the giant devil-dingo came travelling into Cape York. Gaiya was savage and huge, being much bigger than a horse. Old Eelgin was boss of that dingo and used him to hunt and kill men for food."

The white man's obsessions with time, space, laborious explanation and causal logic do not intrude. It is a good story. For teachers in Aboriginal schools seeking resource materials grounded in living Aboriginal culture, it is probably the best work yet published.

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