



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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has a coherence and orthodoxy which must be maintained to preserve its integrity and passed on to provide meaning for future generations. But is not static or frozen, nor 'carbon-dated', it is alive and in responsive dialogue with vibrant cultural life (p. 211).

This book assists librarians, archivists and informational professionals to right some of the wrongs of cultural disruption wrought by colonisation. It helps us on a path to reconnecting Indigenous Australians with a past that memory may have been only partially retained. It serves too to promote respectful treatment of Indigenous culture within our society at large while emphasising the necessity for engagement and consultation with that culture.

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- ## SIN-E-ANNE
- Cindy Ballard & Samantha Laden
Self-Published by Samantha Laden, Perth, n.d., 80pp
[eBook, CD-Rom with print text and sound recording, and multi-media elements]
- Reviewed by Frances Devlin-Glass
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- Sin-E-Anne* is an oral narrative of Placida Cynthia Ballard, a Yamitji woman, written down by her friend and mentor, Samantha Laden. It is a story of survival of a mission experience and of successful escape from New Norcia, and it writes back to such narratives as the tragic tale of Doris Pilkington's mother, which was the basis for the film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. New Norcia was not, it seems, the hell-hole that Moore River was, but it was certainly a place where children endured much hardship and suffered the loss of family. Punishments were milder, but still traumatic for the child – a rough and punitive haircut for attempting to run away; enclosure in a vermin-infected cupboard for up to an hour for lesser offences (stealing figs). So out of proportion was the punishment that it erased the memory of what provoked it, and so was totally ineffective as a deterrent. The work was tough and the Spanish nuns sometimes tyrannical – mountains of washing for hundreds of children, if you were a girl, or worked in the kitchen – and the narrative makes clear that the state and the church got a cheap labour force out of such establishments. She does, however, remember with pleasure the duties of the chookpen and the excitement of holyday feasts of roast chicken as a wonderful break from the more normal fare of sheep's head soup, complete with eyes, or weevily weeties.
- The form of this memoir is quite original: the print version can be downloaded if you wish, but it is a searchable archive populated with lots of images and some short video clips. I'm told that there is a way of hearing the narrative, though I could not make this work. Assuming it does work, that is a useful device for secondary school-age students who may be print-averse, or having reading difficulties as the combination of sound and print may be a useful one for teaching them how to correlate sound and print. The narrative is written in a style fairly close to the vernacular, but a tad more formal.
- The narrative waxes and wanes in its intensity. The parts which I found most interesting and which may be usefully extracted for classroom use are:
- The childhood idyll of Sin-E-Anne (Pacida Cynthia's pet-name generated by pronunciation difficulties with "th"), is located in the pre-mission days when

they lived in a close extended three-generational family, and though outcast from the mainstream, they were nonetheless relatively self-contained as a family and close to country catching fish and animals.

- The children's confinement to the orphanage (though not orphans) at New Norcia and the drudgery ("slavery") and privations (lack of food, of warm clothing, but mostly of stimulation) of the workhouse where training for menial jobs substituted for education; although the narrator is critical of her Catholic educators, this section is quite balanced and nuanced, and she eschews melodrama and apports praise and blame judiciously; the account of how the nuns spruced up the children with shoes and good clothes when they were to be on show on high holydays or when they were temporarily fostered out for holidays was quite shocking and wryly told.
- The account of her growing sexual awareness in an era when there was no preparation for puberty and no sex education (this book might provide some interesting stimulus material for such classes).
- The dramatic story of the escape from the mission without any resources or money. In an era when it would be radically unsafe for a young woman of 14 to be turning up in unknown townships with no food, contacts, money or plan for survival really surprised me. That she met decent people, and many of them, and was not taken advantage of was even more surprising.

The post-marriage section is vitiated by Ms Ballard's inability to tell the whole story because of privacy concerns, and this is a shame. The narrative raises more questions than it can answer. Why, for instance, did the relationship with Peter fall apart when his extended family seemed so willing to support the young mother? And when the relationship seems to have continuing viability, not only for the children but also our central character. Cynthia's many attempts to return to her own family were also not able to be dealt with as fully as this reader wished, I suspect because of issues to do with shame, and alcohol seems to be the subtext of such (understandable) reticence, but it does make the narrative hard to tell. One wonders too about the disruptive effects of transient work at some distance from the last job, and the disempowering nature of educational deficits in the families she describes.

It is not at all predictable but the tale ends happily for Sin-E-Anne. The impossibility of such a young woman virtually alone coping with five children resulted in years of such deep depression that she was forced to put her own children back into the home she had escaped from in high dudgeon as a young teenager. However, her own grief for her old sad self forced her to rescue the most unhappy of the

children. However, it is real educational opportunities that enable her escape from the margins of life and into the mainstream of work – first as a kindergarten aid, and then as a health worker with her own people, and taking out university diplomas for good measure. The availability of state housing, TAFE and short university courses, and a new man were other elements in the recovery plan. Her children, needless to say, learnt from her experience and themselves got educated.

This memoir tells of a woman who begins life with advantages (of Indigenous sociality) that the mainstream does not value. In being consigned to the mission to 'get civilisation', she was short-changed educationally and emotionally, though she acquired skills which she was able later to capitalise on in seeking work as a young girl in kitchens. Just how she made the leap into education is an aspect of this narrative I was curious about, as it would be instructive. This CD-Rom added to my understanding of how an ordinary woman negotiated a seemingly rigid class and race system, and successfully overrode the internalisation of shame. I hope that excerptable sections of it will be used in schools, as it does Australian race history from an unusual perspective. It is, though, a narrative that although heart-warming and inspirational, could do with a sympathetic literary editor with a well-sharpened blue pencil. It needs pruning and grammatical and typographical emendation before it could be used in schools.

TREADING LIGHTLY: THE HIDDEN WISDOM OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST PEOPLE

Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe
Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2006, xx+304pp,
ISBN 978 1 74114 874 9

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This is an easy-reading text that is absorbing in its presentation of one perspective of pre-European Aboriginal lifeways. It is a significant text for knowledge for there is much in common in this book's Indigenous content with many of the east coast and western plains Aboriginal peoples. The overlays possibly have many similarities and