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Reviews

Warrigal's Way

Warrigal Anderson

University of Queensland Press, 1996, 218 pp.

Reviewed by Ann Shaddock, Ngunnawal Centre, University of Canberra.

Warrigal's Way is an account of an Aboriginal man's journey through life from the days when Aboriginal people were, as Anderson says, considered 'less than a white man's dog' to the point where he finally 'comes off the grey line' and is recognised as a person.

Warrigal Anderson's autobiography begins with the description of his early life in Swan Hill, Victoria, with a violent father and a hardworking mother who struggled to bring up three small children. 'The Department' (characterised in the small child's mind as the feared 'black suits') had taken his brother and sister away, and Warrigal and his mum lived in constant terror that he also would be taken. They moved to Melbourne in 1958 and, because of the warrant out on him, Warrigal could not risk going to school. At the age of ten, with only an old port and a five pound note, he was told to 'bolt' by his mum to Hall's Gap to stay with relatives because 'the black suits' were coming. He never reached Hall's Gap, and he never saw his mother again.

At age ten he began what turned out to be an epic journey throughout many parts of Australia and New Zealand and his experiences give us a clear picture of various rural and urban industries of the late fifties and sixties. The novel gives us insight not only into the conditions of Aboriginal people but also into the lives of itinerant workers of the times — drovers, meat workers, fruit pickers, factory workers and labourers.

In the early part of the novel we see the world afresh through the innocent eyes of a child. The wonder of his first ferry trip, his first sight of a coconut tree and taste of a persimmon are some examples of the way Warrigal Anderson presents the child's perspective. We step inside the young

boy and see a world which is coloured by the optimism of youth and we view Australia and Australians through his generous and tolerant eyes.

It is this generosity of spirit which pervades the novel and makes it something special. Despite oppressive government policies and harsh social conditions, Warrigal Anderson never blames individuals for his treatment; rather, he excuses them on the grounds of ignorance, stating that 'like most white Australians outside the church and government they didn't have a clue what was going on'. On the other hand, he is well aware of the racism that exists in Australian society and realises he often escapes the worst kind because he 'looks white'. He tells of past instances of racism, for example the boab tree used as a gaol for Aborigines in days gone by and of some 'old blokes' in one country town who refer to how they 'shifted' the local blacks to an out-of-town settlement rather than live alongside 'thieving Blacks'.

He also describes more recent incidents of racism when he describes being refused service in an outback pub because his companions were local blacks in a town where Aboriginal people were not given a 'fair go'. Although he could have kept comfortably quiet in such situations, Warrigal always stood up for Aboriginal people and their human rights even to the extent that he broke off his relationship with his 'soulmate' when she expressed racist attitudes.

Although the novel has racism and oppression as a constant backdrop, it is also full of tremendous love of life and humour. The humour ranges from dry comments such as those about the boarding school pupil who was his travelling companion and who was 'so riveting' Warrigal nearly 'went to sleep', to the farcical snake anecdotes which are sprinkled throughout the book.

The lack of bitterness Anderson shows throughout the novel may be surprising to many because of the severe oppression suffered by himself and his family. However, the absence of bitterness may possibly be the result of the many positive experiences he had with whites, in particular with

the stockmen who raised him from the age of ten to his early teens and gave him his treasured gift of an education. His continuing affection for them is evidenced by the dedication of his novel to them. It is heartwarming to read of the kindness and protectiveness he engendered in almost all he met, especially in our present climate of exposed child exploitation and abuse.

Although bitterness is absent and he takes care to make it clear he believes 'not all white people are bastards' he does lash out at the authorities who destroyed so many Aboriginal families. He pulls no punches when he rails at 'those rotten government and political bastards destroying families using the dirtiest weapon they had, churches, self-righteous bloody despots running government slave labour camps'.

The novel is written in a direct and conversational tone, making it accessible to readers of all ages and reading levels. It could be used in a variety of educational settings (high school and tertiary) as a literary text or as an adjunct to an Australian History course or an Aboriginal Studies unit. *Warrigal's Way* is full of yarns and Anderson is an adept storyteller, but the novel is also an important history showing our nation through the eyes of an Indigenous man, and it will no doubt join the growing number of similar successful publications. It is a book pervaded by a generosity of spirit which should ensure its position in the hearts of all Australians. □



Hand-in-Hand Parents and Teachers Make a Difference

As a parent, have you ever asked 'What can I do to give my child the best start to learning words and numbers?'

As an early childhood educator, have you ever asked 'What resources are available for me to share with parents about literacy and numeracy?'

A new literacy and numeracy package for parents is currently being developed by the office of the Queensland School Curriculum Council (QSCC) which will provide some of the answers to these questions.

The package, with the working title *Hand-in-Hand*, is designed for parents of young children and will contain information that explains the nature of literacy and numeracy development from birth. The package includes a poster, brochure (available in six community languages), six topic cards, a handbook and a video.

Throughout the materials, parents will recognise daily routines like sharing a meal and bathtime

and see how these activities contribute to a young child's knowledge about 'words and numbers'. Early childhood educators will also be able to refer to these materials to assist in effectively incorporating home experiences in their education programs.

The initial draft of materials is currently being revised by project team members before final production in March 1997. The complete package will be distributed in late May 1997 to coincide with *Under Eights Week* and will be available for loan from key early childhood, health and community centres. After the initial distribution, packages will be available for sale to interested organisations or individuals.

If you would like more details on either the project or the availability of the completed package, please contact Belinda Macartney, Project Officer (07) 3235 4726. □