



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## Reviews

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### *Serpent Dust*

Debra Adelaide

A Vintage book published by Random House Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney Australia:1998. 228pp.

#### Reviewed by Dennis Foley

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I was recently asked by a Head of English Department of a sizeable Brisbane suburban state school had I read this book *Serpent Dust* as it had been referred to her as a possible reader for year eleven and twelve students. A review of the *Serpent Dust* had recently been done by Ms. Lyn Linning, from the School of Language and Literacy Education at the Queensland University of Technology, published in *English in Australia* (1999:64-69). Ms. Linning describes it "as a well researched historical novel" (1999:68).

As an Indigenous Australian who is a descendant of the Eora people, on reading Ms. Adelaide's text, 210 years of pain, hatred and frustration surged through my veins. From an Indigenous Australian's perspective, it falls short of being a well-researched historical novel as my QUT colleague states.

Adelaide, a literary critic of some reputation who has had limited success in previous publications has used a shroud of mystery in combining fact with fiction, fiction with fact to produce a work that is from an Eora's perspective literary trash in its Indigenous Australian factual content as is a 'girlie' magazine sexist trash to a feminist.

Adelaide has interwoven fact with her deviant plot to not only portray my ancestral women as "slippery as an eel outside, inside as hot and soft as any man could ask" (1998:169), she has re-enforced the common stereotype that Aboriginal woman are quick for sexual pleasure in the metaphorical state of a wild beast.

Her culturally indecent narrative by the character Dyrira goes beyond cultural protocols of what can be deemed acceptable in English literature. This is brought to the readers' attention as a note to the reader, however if Adelaide had taken the time to consult Eora women she would find it is culturally insensitive to women more so than men. Sensationalism intertwined with the 'rightness' of white literacy should have some moral accountability. The fact that this work was assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australian Council of Arts funding and advisory body is a serious issue. Is the Australian Council of Arts supporting culturally insensitive so called 'historical novels'?

Without arguing the negative aspects of this publication further, which may only serve to support its sensationalism, at the end of the day you must ask yourself, is this the kind of literature that you want your children to read?

From an Indigenous perspective and as a father of two teenage children, the sexual connotations are bad enough. The negative stereotyping mixed with culturally unacceptable material of traditional birth is difficult to tolerate. The deviant mix of fact and fiction, the complex triangle relationship of the minister, his wife and her sister, these, when mixed with a historical overlay produce a work that is questionable in its literary value.

The ultimate suggestions that the smallpox was spread by the Eora's own greed for glass is unacceptable. Eora oral history portrays a different story. Adelaide is mischievous in this scenario, creating a fictional possibility that may create a false impression on the reader.

Overall, it is a book that perhaps is a product of our turbulent political time. It should not be a reader for impressionable teenagers and perhaps is best left in the dusty repositories of libraries, not for public display.