

## ***Saltwater* by Cathy McLennan**

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**T**his book needs to be acknowledged as a potentially challenging and polarising read on a difficult subject. It is one that has attracted positive public acclaim, and rankled some others as well. It is a book that tells some hard truths, and risks saying some unsayable things. For those who are unaware of some of the significant issues on Palm Island and in youth detention, particularly as they pertain to Indigenous youth, this book is a must-read. For those who are members of this community, the narrative may be too close to home, and the risk of these hard truths being told in ways that point the blame too squarely at those involved, without appraising the larger structural complexities and social issues that are implicated, is perhaps too high.

The other point that must be made is that though this is a memoir, it also calls on some complex issues at the heart of the ethics of life writing. Is this Cathy McLennan's story to tell, or do these stories belong to a community other than her own? Is she permitted to speak about or for a community for which she has played a custodial role, when she is not a custodian of this community, in the terms of reference usually invoked by Australian Aboriginal communities?

This memoir, by former defence lawyer Cathy McLennan, traces her experiences as a barrister for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service in Townsville and Palm Island. She recounts her involvement with the cases of "Olivia"—both a perpetrator and victim of crime by turns—and accused murderers "Bert," "Dillon," "Kevin" and "Malachi," while weaving in the minor cases and events surrounding these two major narratives. Painting a stark picture of the cycles of poverty and abuse in the Aboriginal communities of Townsville and Palm Island alongside the depths of institutional racism in the Queensland legal system, McLennan writes of the plight faced by overworked and underpaid Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Legal Service lawyers caught between the two.

McLennan begins her account before the start of her legal career, recalling a school trip to Palm Island where she first realised the disparity between the conditions facing children in communities like Palm and those to which she had grown accustomed. The book then provides a dramatised rendering of the events leading up to the death of Peter Lewis, a white man whose murder drives McLennan's narrative. It is only at this point that the pace slows down and McLennan starts her tale proper with recollections of defending clients on Palm Island. However, as she introduces the key individuals involved in the Lewis murder, tension rapidly returns. McLennan describes the abuse of children and adults, the casual disinterest

of the police force, prosecutors and magistrates, and most shockingly, manages to elicit sympathy and understanding from her reader for all involved. She reveals the way that the general malaise of an uncaring legal system and a lack of adequate support rapidly burns out even those with the very best of intentions. *Saltwater* portrays Family Services as underfunded and disorganised, unable to help children like eleven-year-old Olivia, whose alcoholic mother is incapable of caring for her and whose father is in prison for the attempted murder of her mother. This situation leaves "Olivia" not only suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome, but also relying on theft and prostitution for the small amounts of money, drugs and alcohol on which she subsists.

Although *Saltwater* continues to follow Olivia's tragic circumstances and her compulsive thievery remains a constant concern of its account, it is an ancillary story to McLennan's recollections of the Lewis murder case involving 13-year old Kevin, the mentally challenged Bert and two older boys Dillon and Malachi. The boys are identified as suspects in the case, and McLennan takes up the task of making sense of the events that led to Lewis's death. She sets out believing all four boys to be innocent, but soon realises that Malachi, who himself has been a victim of abuse, exhibits violent tendencies. He eventually admits to having committed the murder, but basic assumptions of guilt and innocence belie the complexities of the case. The methodical and intricate way in which McLennan reconstructs these events interweaves the threads of the plot, slowly revealing clues and information about the circumstances and people involved.

Like a mystery novel, *Saltwater* does not immediately present its reader with all the facts of each case, but instead provides morsels of information, while allowing each case to bleed into the next. It gradually reveals how this small community is interconnected and how crime and abuse reverberates through these connections. Most importantly, *Saltwater* suggests that the Palm Island community is constantly under-served by government agencies to such an extent that it is almost impossible for individuals to overcome institutional indifference. The degree to which Cathy McLennan is able to help some of her clients is dramatically overshadowed by the obstructionism of police, the revolving door of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service employment, the uncaring attitude of prosecutors and magistrates and the overwhelming scope of the problems faced by the community.

Indeed, much of the book demonstrates how the legal system becomes destructive when examined at a personal level. McLennan describes a system that transforms victims into culprits and guardians into assailants. For every success there is an inevitable failure, and those who are caught up in this system are either constantly beaten down by it or simply cease to care at all. The only reprieve comes in the form of uplifting moments and small victories. The hopelessness of the situation is most evident in the murder case involving the four boys, where forced confessions extracted by police are never requited, but is also central to the story of "Adam," a boy who loses a brother and home to arson, and of course, Olivia. Every time McLennan manages to help Olivia, she is soon thrown back into the criminal justice system. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service advocate for her removal from Palm Island to escape sexual abuse, only for a magistrate to send her back due to constant theft

convictions. Upon returning to Palm, Olivia once again becomes the victim of abuse, culminating in gang rape. It is only at this tragic stage that McLennan poses some hope of genuine escape for Olivia, when her mother ignores a court order and takes her away from the island. Even the courts decline to pursue the issue further at this point.

*Saltwater* does not provide easy answers or simple solutions to the problems that plague communities like Palm. As an outsider granted a custodial role in a community to which she does not belong, tensions remain around McLennan's right to tell this story. Nevertheless, she describes a situation where tragedy is the only impetus for change and where justice lies beyond the reach of the rule of law. As an instrument of state intervention on Palm, McLennan is certainly well placed to criticise the failure of the Australian legal system to achieve its intended consequences. Whether the confronting stories of the very real people caught up in such a failing legal system are also hers to tell, however, remains a question that must be answered by each reader on a personal basis. Either way, *Saltwater* is inevitably a confronting work, and a piercing indictment of the law's capacity to protect some of the most vulnerable members of Australian society.

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