

Book review

Brian M McCoy (2008) *Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal Men* RRP \$34.95 ISBN: 978 0 85575 658 1 Publisher: Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS

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In *Holding Men*, McCoy explores issues central to the Indigenous men of the Western Desert region. Issues of masculinity, of grief, of illness, and how these relate to Kalyirninpa (holding, nurturing, teaching, growing-up, respect). Though specifically about that region, *Holding Men* has crucial implications for the whole of Australia.

For nearly forty years Brian McCoy has lived and worked with Indigenous communities, mostly in the Western Desert, and from this depth of experience and from his PhD research about the health and well-being of Aboriginal men, comes this extraordinary book.

It is a book about an ancient culture and its people, trying in their own way, to survive in 21st century Australia. Rigorously researched yet simply written, it challenges us with human stories of heart-breaking enormity whilst reflecting a quiet hope in resilience and healing of *kalyirninpa*.

There are many profound insights in this book, which come from years of respectful relationships and deep reflection. *Kalyirninpa* points a way forward, a way out of the nightmarish day to day tragedies of disease and ill-health among Indigenous Australians, because it involves 'a proper looking after'.

Three chapters in particular situate serious current issues for Indigenous communities, particularly men, within the embrace of *Kalyirninpa*: 'Petrol sniffing: More than a risk'; 'Football: More than a game'; 'Prison: more than a holiday'. As McCoy puts it: 'From the perspective of *kanyirninpa* these socially significant spaces (petrol sniffing, Australian Rules and prison) can offer men both healthy outcomes and unhealthy risks'. My own meaning making around those 'spaces' was deeply challenged and enriched with constructive alternatives.

The key *Puntu* (Aboriginal) values, of *ngarra* (land), *walytja* (family) and *tjukurrpa* (ancestral dreaming) are represented as 'continually dynamic and inter-relating' and *kanyirninpa* provides the balance for creative tension between relatedness and autonomy, on

the one hand and nurturance and authority, on the other. McCoy manages to maintain a similar balance in his book.

Juxtaposed to his deeply sensitive, respectful, inculturated research - in the tradition of de Nobili or Matteo Ricci - is his empathy and compassion for those affected by the personal tragedies associated with petrol sniffing, alcohol abuse, a prison sentence or premature death.

McCoy's insights are profound and he is able to articulate them in a very clear way. His rolling narrative at times has the feel of a foreign correspondent in a battle zone. This is a silent 'battle zone', and arguably the most important moral battle ground in Australia today.

Holding Men is also a challenging resource for policy makers in the area of Indigenous health and well-being, precisely because it is the antithesis of armchair philosophising and moralising. It is deeply respectful and mindful (and heartfelt), of traditional values and customs (eg 'Sorry Business') and offers a key to understanding the links between life and death, mourning and celebration, health and disease, for Western Desert Indigenous people.

McCoy manages to move through this difficult terrain with the sure-footedness of an ancient Aboriginal tracker and a confidence founded on years of sitting, listening, observing and quietly healing. Reading the book is at times like sitting in on a conversation under a Boab tree. Brian McCoy is a healer who carries his wisdom quietly. The ethical dilemmas and questions are addressed with integrity, humanity, respect and truthfulness, with no attempt at glib answers.

This is an important book, written in a lucid thoughtful way that leads us step by step through what is, for most of us, foreign land on Australian soil. In particular *Holding Men* lets us feel the impact on Indigenous boys and young men, no longer being held by the land, by their elders, more and more autonomous and physical and psychological peril, adrift from their traditions, lands and culture.

Holding Men is about being wounded but it is also about being resilient and the possibility or hope of building that resilience in others, both individually and in community, through *kalyirninpa* .

The Indigenous artwork is riveting, confronting and evocative, with many paintings graphically illustrating the stories of young Aboriginal men and the spaces they find themselves in.

The Spirit of Christmas is fully alive and well in *Holding Men* .

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