

**Louis Nowra, *Bad Dreaming:*  
*Aboriginal Men's Violence against Women and Children,*  
North Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-9802924-0-4**

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In *Bad Dreaming*, the white playwright Louis Nowra focuses on sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities. Nowra endorses the Aboriginal elder Mick Dodson's argument that this abuse is "everyone's problem" and writes that he hopes his book will help keep this subject "before the public" for the purposes of discussion and debate (8). Nowra's text is impassioned and undoubtedly well-intentioned. Unfortunately, though, it is also imbued with a distinctly Anglocentric attitude towards the issue it explores.

In the opening page, Nowra relays one of the experiences that prompted him to write this book. He recalls how, while staying in an Alice Springs hospital, he met an Aboriginal man "who was quite proud that he had raped a thirteen year old girl" (1). In the pages that follow, Nowra describes various other acts of sexual violence that Aboriginal women and children have experienced at the hands of Aboriginal men. The writer also describes how this abuse has been silenced by Aboriginal "cultural traditions" (7), as well as by white men and women who have considered that reporting sexual violence in Aboriginal communities might be a racist act in itself. Nowra concludes his text by considering some ways of "helping (Aboriginal) women and children" escape this violence (89).

Nowra has done some broad-ranging research into his chosen topic. His bibliography lists a range of academic texts, media articles and reports such as *Breaking the Silence* by The Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce. However, Nowra seldom cites these references throughout the body of his book. His failure to do this proves to be a particular problem when the

author makes such broad statements as: "...Aboriginal children knew more about sexuality at a much younger age than their Western counterparts" (29). Reading statements such as this, one is led to wonder whether the author has substituted speculation for facts. (And I might note here Nowra's incorrect use of the word 'Western' – the terms 'Anglo-Saxon' or even 'white' would be more accurate.)

However, my greatest concern with *Bad Dreaming* is the pessimistic and patronising attitude the author frequently displays towards Aboriginal communities. I do not deny that Nowra is genuinely outraged and saddened by the prevalence of sexual violence in these communities. Yet I found the book's overall suggestion – that Aboriginal men and women are mostly unwilling to stop this violence – to be quite disturbing. Nowra is particularly critical of the indifference that Aboriginal men supposedly have towards rape and, in fact, any problem facing Aboriginal communities. He makes this clear in passages such as the following:

(Aboriginal) men not only have to realise that their behaviour is undermining Aboriginal culture but that they are creating a generation of boys without good role models – whether through their terrible behaviour, that they are in prison much of the time, or are constantly drunk and stoned ... Men must be taught that their behaviour towards women is wrong, just as is happening in non-indigenous Australia.(91)

In contrast, it is "non-Indigenous" men and women who appear to be most concerned with sexual violence, poverty and substance abuse amongst members of Australia's Aboriginal population. Early in the text, Nowra writes that "traditional Aboriginal sexual practices" – in which he includes rape, child sexual abuse and incest – have "appalled many whites" (28). There is scant reference to the sexual abuse (and other myriad forms of violence) that Aboriginal women, children and men have experienced at the hands of white men and women. Elsewhere, he observes that "overseas visitors" to this country have been "shocked" by what they have witnessed in many Aboriginal communities (37). This latter observation is particularly dubious: Nowra seems to be suggesting that many of the problems facing Aboriginal people are problems because they pose a potential threat to Australia's tourist industry.

Conversely, Nowra's remarks about white men and women who have avoided speaking out about sexual violence in Aboriginal communities are also imbued with racism. He is certainly correct to point out that, throughout Australian history, many politicians and members of "progressive" social movements have often ignored Aboriginal concerns (33). However, Nowra

then criticises an article by gender studies academic Elspeth Probyn in which she

wrote that the abuse in Aboriginal communities is supposedly rife yet was horrified that children would be removed from their families, even though it would be to protect them from a grim situation. Ideology has taken precedence over revealing the ghastly facts of what is happening to indigenous women, boys and girls (33-4).

Nowra appears to be implying here that the removal of Aboriginal children from their families was always done in the best interest of these children. Such an implication fits in perfectly with the kind of historically naïve and white supremacist rhetoric that has long been expounded by conservative figures such as Pauline Hanson. And, like these conservatives, Nowra dismisses would-be critics of his argument by suggesting that they are blinded by “ideology.”

At this point, I should disclose my own racialised and gendered subject position. I am (like Nowra) a white male. Also, I agree that the issue of sexual violence in Aboriginal communities is one that should be of concern to the Australian community as a whole (as well as, dare I say it, “overseas visitors”). However, I do not believe that one can work towards overcoming sexual violence amongst Aboriginal Australians by arguing that they “can’t even govern themselves” (84). Such an argument only fuels stereotypes of Aboriginal people as uncivilised, inherently destructive (and self-destructive) and in need of taming by white men and women. These stereotypes will not help build allegiances between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and they certainly will not help achieve justice for Aborigines.

In conclusion, *Bad Dreaming* will possibly help to increase media attention on the issue of sexual violence in Aboriginal communities. A recent article on the book that was published in Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper seems to confirm this. However, it is hoped that in the future, more media attention will also be given to Aboriginal men and women who are working to eliminate sexual violence in their communities.

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