

***Riding the Black Cockatoo* by John Danalis**

The title of this publication conjures up many possible visualisations. Danalis has interwoven a variety of themes into this unique story of his life and the rigid upbringing as a child. John, a university student in Brisbane, Queensland and the central character, starts a mysterious journey as he tries to come to grips with a strange object kept in his family home.

On a cupboard in the lounge room, a human skull looks down on all people in the room. After years and years of lacquering, this human skull yellows and finally haunts John to find out where in heavens the skull came from and why his father kept it in the family home.

John's father, as with many of Australia's older citizens, displays traits, beliefs and attitudes that reinforce entrenched stereotypes of Aboriginal people. Lazing under trees all day, barely clothed, unsociable with white Australians and lack of respect for indigenous people's customs and beliefs are several topics that Danalis covers whilst intertwining his story of the search for the origin of the skull. His father started his leads informing John that the skull was dug up in Wamba Wamba country in the Swan hill region of northern Victoria. This piece of information could lead interested readers into researching the tribal regions of the many aboriginal clans found in Australia.

A research trail commenced. John began to utilise the many resources at his university. The indigenous education department at the uni, Oodgeroo, provided links to the indigenous community which John used to logical and respectful affect.

In proceeding along the road to handing back such a sensitive piece of aboriginal life force, John developed his own realisation of the importance of strengthening the healing links between all Australians. His journey took him into the inner sanctums of tribal elders related to the return of 'Mary' the skull.

The planning for the handing back of 'Mary' involved a variety of interested parties and Danalis explains their roles in an intriguing yet empathetic fashion. The importance of Ceremonial actions are also presented to the reader and allows for the significance of aboriginal cultural traditions. The cloak of black cockatoo feathers is used in the hand over ceremony along with the skills of a song man. The Black Cockatoo had emotional significance for John when he started on his journey of hand back.

As an adjunct to the whole handing over ceremony, John visits Melbourne on his way to Swan Hill. He joins a protest in the Botanical gardens and again highlights the many factors which can affect the reconciliation process open to all Australians.

Trevor Dangerfield, Elisabeth Murdoch College, VIC

Riding the Black Cockatoo is a powerful book about Indigenous Australian and White Australian relations. This book is about reconciliation and in particular about restoring Indigenous Australian pride and culture. The story, written in the form of John Danalis' personal reflection, follows the true account of the giving back of an Aboriginal skull. Danalis grew up with the Aboriginal skull on the mantelpiece of his family home, affectionately called 'Mary'. Through becoming aware of the importance of Indigenous culture when doing a University course, Danalis embarks on a monumental journey (for him, his family and Indigenous Australians) of learning who and where the skull belongs and giving it back. Along the way Danalis learns about his own powers of not giving up and makes some very important friends especially in the Indigenous community. *Riding the Black Cockatoo* becomes also a journey of Indigenous people, and in particular the Wamba Wamba of the Murray River, to re-connect with their own cultural pride and rediscover their rich heritage.

Riding the Black Cockatoo is about more than that though. Danalis discusses many of his own attitudes (which probably mirror many Australians) and it becomes an important exploration of prejudices and atonement in a nation trying to come to terms with and heal itself from past actions and injustices. The book also explores the power of the media to be both an instrument of good, in publicising an event that every Australian needs to know about, but also a detrimental force, in that it upholds many of the negative stereotypes of Indigenous Australians. Overwhelmingly, *Riding the Black Cockatoo* leaves the reader with a strong sense of hope in the future of race relations in Australia and that there can be reconciliation between all Australians on a pragmatic level.

Riding the Black Cockatoo is an essential read for all Australians and could valuably be used in a Year 10 or 11 class in the study of non-fiction text(s) and/or Indigenous literature about reconciliation. Danalis' writing style is very engaging and very truthful about his own attitudes and issues, especially with depression. In this way it seems as though he is speaking directly to the audience rather than lecturing them. He is a composer who befriends the reader with his personal style and draws us into his own personal quest for understanding.

Gersha Shteyman, Kesser Torah College, NSW

The black cockatoo is the totem animal of the Wamba Wamba clan. John Danalis' book is the (true) story of "Mary", an aboriginal skull which had sat on his family's mantelpiece throughout his childhood and of the unfolding process of the skull's return to Wamba Wamba country where "her" people lived. This is more than the story of a journey: it brings together two cultures and their people. It is also John's story as he moves from ignorance to understanding, to activism and it examines his emotional responses, which had a deep and surprising impact on him.

The book is a true story, a serious issue is tackled, but it is told as part detective story, part autobiography and part rollicking adventure. This book will satisfy those who want all or one of these stories. It will also challenge some of our preconceived ideas and help us to empathise with different cultures and perspectives. It could be used with young adults looking at different perspectives or studies of Australia's history of dealing with aboriginal culture.

Barbara Wilson, St George Christian School, NSW

John Danalis grew up with the skull of an Indigenous Australian on his family's mantelpiece. He didn't question it, or give it a lot of thought, for many years until he realised that it was part of a person, and that it needed to be returned home. The text is the non-fiction retelling of his quest to return the skull and what he learnt about Australian society and himself on the way.

A very personal narrative, *Riding the Black Cockatoo* is written in a conversational and accessible style. The story of 'Mary', the skull, is recounted in a linear narrative to its conclusion with the return of the skull to Wamba Wamba country, from where it had been taken. Along the way John is forced to examine his attitudes to Indigenous Australians, land rights, history and racism. His amazement at how little he had had to do with indigenous society before beginning his quest, and how many of his own assumptions he had to question and revise, comes through clearly. The style is matter of fact and the text feels like it is telling an authentic experience without overtly moralising, and many of the issues raised are pertinent and thought provoking.

As a non-fiction text and a personal narrative this book has many potential applications within the classroom. The story as a whole is suitable for senior students, but extracts or chapters could easily be used with senior students or other year levels. Many of the encounters Danalis has on his quest and his observations of the individuals he encounters could be discussed as a chapter or excerpt which illustrates one of the main themes he is exploring with the text. Prejudice, assumptions, stereotypes and what it means to be Australian could all be explored using different sections of the text. It is a very interesting and thought provoking text.

Anne Sim, Dromana Secondary College, Vic

I just loved this story! John's journey into the discovery of Aboriginal culture is amazing. Through education, [John's enrolment in an indigenous course in Brisbane], he discovers firstly how ignorant he is in regard to Australian Aborigines and secondly his own connection.

John embarks on a journey to return 'Mary' to his tribal homeland, the Wamba Wamba Nation in Northern Victoria. Along the way his knowledge and experience evolves. I am impressed with John's honesty with the reader as he records this journey, including his thoughts, his inadequacies and insecurities. He is blatantly honest and brave, identifying an apathy I can relate to and inspiring a hope that we can all be a part of this reconciliation.

For me personally, I feel that I know much more than I previously did and have already referred the book to my sister and her husband who are leaving Melbourne shortly to move North, in a deliberate attempt to submerge into an indigenous community. They have heard of many of the people in the book and have even met a couple of them. They loved it too because it is set in Brisbane and Melbourne, is relevant and challenging! It has only been released this year, so it's up to date.

I found *Riding the Black Cockatoo* interesting, relevant, educational, challenging, humourous and entertaining, but most of all, disturbing and sad. I cried and laughed! I loved it!

I would recommend *Riding the Black Cockatoo* to all high school aged students as a necessary read. I would like to see it on school curriculums.

Well done John Danalis and thanks for the book!

Linda Searby, Mountain District Christian School, Vic

John Danalis tells his story in this is a beautiful, moving non-fiction novel of repatriation, of sorry business and of long standing prejudices being shattered. John Danalis grew up in a "normal" middle class, white Australian home. On the mantel of the family home however, sat "Mary" the skull of a male Indigenous Australian. John never thought anything of it until he mentioned it in an Indigenous Studies university class. The shocked reactions of his classmates forced John to address his personal feelings, and those of his family and also his prejudices, and general attitudes. So John began the

journey of returning “Mary” to his country. His candid tone and open honest style allows the reader to feel this story and become a part of it. Use of this book within the classroom could be extensive. It could be used to address attitudes, racism, land rights, history, stereotypes, and many more controversial topics. However, even if not used in the class room, I believe it is a thought provoking book well worth reading by all teachers, students and other Australians.

Carolyn Hicks, Vic

Having worked with a small group of Indigenous parents through the late 1990's, and supported Indigenous High School students to enter University programs, I was prepared to find the known aspects of this memoir difficult: the behaviour of white settlers; the cruelty; the displacement of people from their land, culture and families; the great sense of sorrow and loss. I did find this in John Danalis's writing; but what became immediately apparent, from the opening sentence, was not a strictly academic, historical approach, but a different kind of writing; deeply personal, fresh with discovery of facts and emotions, raw, honest realisation of inbuilt prejudices suddenly broken down. I saw a young man, a parent, a University student comfortable in his own liberal mindedness, blown apart by the reality of his previously distanced perception of ‘the other’. From the scene when John casually reveals to his study group the startling admission that he has lived all of his life with the skull of an Aboriginal man on his parents' mantelpiece, we are electrified by the impact this has; on his study group, on the Aboriginal people to whom he reveals this fact, and ultimately on John and his family.

Danalis's technique of acting as narrator, allowing us to witness his self analysis and understanding of how he changes, allows us to reach another recognition, that as participants in Australian society we too have benefited from the wrongs that were done, and that continue to be done. Danalis does show us that the Aboriginal people who receive Mary's skull, and continue to deal with the enormous weight of ‘scientifically collected material’ are warm, forgiving, and actively working to keep culture alive. The healing journey has begun, some things can be righted, apologies are valued, a way forward can be found, despite the continuing of old, outdated attitudes in some places. Danalis is not kind to the media: his second visit to the Sacred Flame at Melbourne's Domain is harrowing, the behaviour of reporters appalling.

Danalis creates a vivid sensory picture of his own experience; the scent of smoke, of lemon myrtle, of the bush, the things he sees and hears – the helter skelter mad bicycle ride, ‘riding the black cockatoo’. He also allows us to witness a very personal struggle with a descent into mental illness, caused in part by his guilt and the obsessive pursuit of ugly, terrible knowledge. As a reader, I was not as strong as Danalis, and I skimmed over some passages where he details terrible actions from long ago, and from his recent nightmares.

For Australian readers, Danalis provides a fresh, personal perspective on the pain and of the rewards of the healing journey which requires looking at and listening to each other; new migrant, original inhabitant, descendants of first settlers.

Helen Wilde, SA