

## ***Seven Seasons in Aurukun* by Paula Shaw**

*Seven Seasons in Aurukun* by Paula Shaw is a raw and honest memoir of a young, white woman's teaching experiences in an Aboriginal community's school in Cape York. Shaw takes the reader with her on her journey during this period of time by the use of her colourful descriptions, her humour and her ability to describe her inner feelings. We feel her frustrations at the lack of justice, care, food and basic amenities yet the sometimes abundant flow of alcohol available. We feel her empathy and concern for her students and we experience her joy in comprehending some minute part of Aborigine culture or just feeling that she has made a small difference. Shaw's writing allows the reader to endure the stifling tropical heat, visualise the mangy dogs roaming the area, the tenderness she feels as she falls in love, and to experience the swearing and verbal abuse that is all too common an occurrence. This book gives us an insight into what, to most, is an alien community full of political sensitivity, threats of violence, lack of housing, poor health care and the sad state of the education system available to the children. Her decision to leave the community comes from sheer exhaustion and her feelings of hopelessness and despair. I really enjoyed this book. It certainly opened my eyes and made me profoundly proud of Shaw in her undertaking to try to make a difference, even if only for seven seasons.

**Linda de Mestre, NSW**

*Seven Seasons in Aurukun* is a very apt title for Paula Shaw's so personal narrative about her time teaching in a remote Indigenous community. She stated that her intention in writing about that time was to help the reader to 'understand some of the complex issues encountered by a non-Indigenous person working in an aboriginal community'.

Paula's anthropological background, permanent teaching status, and as teacher of Aboriginal studies convinced her of a 'need to get some first hand experience of life in an aboriginal community.' Structured round the engaging cover photo and the seven seasons or eight school terms the author had enjoyed, the book introduces the reader not just to the twenty-six children in her class but to all students, teachers, school workers, to all community members and even visiting politicians.

While wandering round the eight streets of Aurukun with her dog, friends and children, or taking the class on excursions to the rivers, or further away to the Woolies store, she was alert to the social lives of the inhabitants in the local store, the tavern, the new/old Church, or further from the town outskirts, the wild life, the trees, plants, the topography and the river fishing with companions. Several school holidays flying back to cities enabled this teacher to contrast the city with the remote.

Through Paula's deeply emotional experience of Aurukun's isolated culture, the reader may be encouraged to understand how committed teachers may make a difference, amid the indifference in the educational field towards shortcomings there. While the book should be of great interest to all teachers, any educational workers – and politicians, senior school students looking towards a teaching career should find much to interest them.

**Mary McDougall, Qld**

This text was a real eye-opener, very Australian, honest and open. I usually avoid books labelled 'the story of my....' but this was accessible, balanced and, most importantly, interesting. Paula was a young teacher when she arrived in the remote Queensland town of Aurukun, a two hour flight from Cairns. Armed with optimism and the idea she can make a difference to the community, she arrives and is thrown straight into life in the small town and the school. She sees those around her ground down by the realities of life in the town, before being ground down herself. In a very matter of fact retelling, she outlines the pleasures and the difficulties of life in the different seasons, both in the school and in her own life.

As the author questions the impact she can have on the lives of the children in her care and ultimately what place the Western education system has in such a setting, this is a fascinating story, particularly for a teacher. The story neither romanticizes nor condemns Aboriginal life, but simply paints a very vivid description of the conditions of the town and the lives and characteristics of the different individuals she encounters. The harshest words are saved for the politicians who use the township for political points but don't listen to concerns or do anything positive to improve lives. Indeed, we are left wondering, as Paula does, about the morality of politicians who decide to overturn the policy voted on by the townspeople to keep the town dry and who do little to address the day to day needs of those in the town.

This was a great read, particularly for a teacher. The difficulties I face in my classes have been put in perspective now! I could see this used as a senior non-fiction text, but sections could be used in junior classes stimulating discussion on education, on Aboriginal communities, or the 'sorry' debate and what

should be done now. Its matter of fact tone and easily accessible language make it a great first person narrative that sounds authentic and credible.

**Anne Sim, Dromana Secondary College, VIC**

I read this book with an open mind and interest but with little understanding. I could not grasp or come to understand the way this Aboriginal community lived and their culture. The abuse to each other and their body to me is cruel and senseless. I was able to bond with Paula Shaw and feel her empathy, desire to help and need to fulfil her role as a teacher but know that I myself could not last as long as she did in that hot, dirty community seeing such abuse and lack of care. I went on the page-to-page journey with Paula but still, at the last word, could not understand the complexities of Aboriginal life. I take my hat off to Paula Shaw and all the teachers before her and after her who take their knowledge and skills to such remote areas in the hope of making a grain of difference. The things they must discover and learn about culture, our land and themselves would at first be daunting and challenging but build character and be rewarding.

This book is a great memoir of culture, learning, history and politics. I am writing this after just finishing the book and don't really know where to start with its ability to educate. When I read this book I was filled with many emotions. Anger at the Aboriginal culture but anger at white man. Hope and faith in our education system but disapproval and disappointment at the same time. Anger at the lack of willingness of the Aboriginal people to conform to our society but anger at white man for changing their land and introducing issues that the Aboriginal culture cannot deal with. I was left feeling empty and lost at the final closing of the book. I had just finished a journey with Paula Shaw that took me to Aurukun. I had lived there, taught there, eaten there. I had felt the heat, smelt the smells, heard the noises and carried a stick to ward off the mangy dogs as I walked down the street. I had felt fear, laughed, loved and cried. As I boarded the plane to leave I felt the loss and emptiness but will always remember the culture and people of Aurukun.

This book allows each reader to take with him what they choose. Each will have different questions and seek different answers but will have this book in their minds forever.

**Jennifer Deaves, NSW**

For any young adult who is thinking about working as a teacher in a remote community, this is a must-read. Author, Paula Shaw, doesn't spare any of the detail, and her developing empathy with the community of indigenous kids and other teachers is an honest account of the daily challenges. Set in a tropical climate, the overwhelming heat is palpable, as are her inspiring descriptions of the landscapes around the Cape York community where she works. As a record of an extraordinary community, in an extraordinary time, it offers an important contribution to the dynamic history of indigenous Australia. You'll want to take that job – which is to say the outcomes of Shaw's time as a teacher in Aurukun are positive, life-affirming and real.

**Sally Fitzgerald, NSW**

This is not a feel-good story of a young teacher surmounting terrible odds to gain the respect and love of her disadvantaged students. This is not "To Sir with Love" in the Australian bush.

Paula Shaw worked in the remote Aboriginal community of Aurukun during 2004 and 2005. The book is a very personal record of her work, life and loves during this time. She appreciates the beauty of Cape York and the strengths of its community while every day battling the heat, violence and chaos. She tries hard with the kids and has some degree of success, but ultimately she knows she cannot understand the complexities of their lives.

She believes the community has been betrayed by state and federal governments who have shown neglect bordering on malice for the general welfare of the people: "About one third of the kids that turn up each day have mucus oozing from their noses and ears [almost every kid here has some degree of hearing loss due to chronic middle-ear infections]." Her description of the preparations for the visit of the then Prime Minister is sobering.

Paula Shaw further believes that the Australian education system has failed the children and that a different approach is needed. At the moment "Choosing to learn, to really embrace Western-style education, is choosing to make yourself different from most of your community." Not a situation attractive to many.

The book is an easy and enthralling read. It is well crafted, balancing Paula's personal experiences with the educational arguments. But it is not a book for students. It is rather a book for educators and adults concerned to learn more about the problems facing aboriginal society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Pauline Hosking, Mount Lilydale Mercy College, VIC**

*Seven Seasons in Aurukun* by Paula Shaw is a must read for all Australians and especially Australian teachers. However, having said that it is a must read, I have to say that it is quite difficult to read. Grammatically, the writing does not seem to work, and the flip flops between past and present tense leave the writing feeling immature. Paula would be an awesome romance writer; her descriptions of her feelings and personal relationships are able to put the reader in the moment. Paula's very personal experience in trying to fit into a foreign community is well described and the hopelessness of the whole "Aurukun situation" is well felt by the writer. I was deeply concerned about Paula's teaching experience, and got the feeling from her writing that she is not a traditionally trained teacher and certainly not primary trained. Being a primary trained teacher myself, I was flabbergasted at her complete unpreparedness for teaching, let alone teaching in a remote Aboriginal school. In the beginning of her story, she tells of her breakdowns and walking out of the classroom because she had clearly no control, finally she gets help from another teacher who suggests ideas such as the "put up your hand to speak" rule and only sending one child to the toilet at a time. These are basic classroom management skills that a properly trained teacher would already have "up her sleeve". So I am left wondering; was this particular teacher just a one off in her unpreparedness or is it that the situation in remote communities is so bad that no "real" teacher would go there. By the end of the story, I am convinced that the latter is true. Paula successfully highlights the political and social issues surrounding the community and in particular, the hopelessness of teaching and education in general. Her personal story of dealing with homes being broken into, petrol sniffers, violence, alcohol, car thieves hooning at night, howling dogs and the unrelenting heat do not paint a pretty picture. However, her small successes in the classroom and her staying power make her a brave and honorable person whom I am sure readers will look up to.

**Carolyn Hicks, VIC**

*Seven Seasons in Aurukun* is an honest and raw account of Paula Shaw's experience of teaching in an Indigenous school in Northern Queensland. Readers experience day by day the agonising adjustments that Paula has to make to adapt to teaching in such a challenging environment. This book has resonance for any teacher who has experienced the struggle for survival in the days as a beginning teacher. There is a lot of anger in this book as Paula experiences frustration at the system that has so comprehensively failed to deliver for aboriginal children. Attendance is the most difficult issue because on a daily basis you never know who will turn up for class. Disadvantage is everywhere, the state of housing, the all pervading violence, petrol sniffing, alcohol abuse, poverty and dietary concerns. There is little that a teacher can do when students turn up to school undernourished, lacking in sleep, exposed to destructive violence and with little or no work ethic.

The reader learns about various educational experiments that have come and gone and failed to have impact on the educational outcomes of the students. Those students who are recognised as having some ability are shipped off to boarding schools and face isolation and cultural alienation. This is a very confronting book as it does not provide answers; these are complex problems and simple solutions will not work.

Yet within this despair we learn about the beautiful environment of North Queensland and the impact of the seasons and the generosity of the environment as it delivers so much to the inhabitants. In desperation after seven seasons, Paula cannot give anymore and is emotionally spent, with tears in her eyes and mixed feelings she says goodbye to Aurukun.

Intertwined with the story of her time as a teacher are the personal relationships that she develops. This novel would be suitable for teachers and older students as the language is confronting and there are sex scenes. This is a must read for teachers who wish to broaden their understanding of indigenous education and the issues faced in aboriginal communities.

**Sharon Marchingo, Crusoe Secondary College, VIC**

This highly readable personal narrative written by a young teacher, Paula Shaw, makes an important contribution to contemporary pre-service teacher education in Australia. Having read this 250 page book out of personal interest, I then shared quotes from it with fourth year teacher education students. This was a way to portray another teacher's perspectives of some of the challenges and satisfactions of teaching in a remote Aboriginal community. A number of my tertiary students were inspired to read on.

Shaw writes a very honest account of her experiences over two teaching years. Her inclusion of the opportunities and limitations on relationship building in a remote community and the details of her consecutive romantic adventures may interest other young teachers considering a remote school contract. Details about the home comforts missed by teachers in remote settings, culturally-specific communication styles and the way that Shaw embraced opportunities she would not have considered 'back home', add to the

appeal of this book. Purists may not appreciate the mixture of personal narrative with issues of pedagogy, but I would argue that this is the reality of teaching in remote Aboriginal communities. Personal and professional challenges abound.

I recommend this book as a realistic read for those beginning to consider issues in indigenous education, remote area teaching or cross-cultural contexts. Shaw provides a useful model for teacher's professional journals. She does not claim to have been an outstanding success as a teacher but she recognizes her part in significant achievements in the classroom and community. She highlights the rich potential for personal and professional growth that remote teaching experiences offer to those brave enough to move outside their comfort zones.

**Dr Carmel Bochenek, Edith Cowan University, WA**

*Seven Seasons in Aurukun* takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride of experiences and emotions as its writer, Paula Shaw, gives us her personal insight into the world of teaching in a remote Aboriginal community. From the time of her arrival to the time of her departure, Paula shares her thoughts, feelings and experiences with a gritty yet refreshing honesty. Confronted with a culture she doesn't understand, in a setting completely new, she recounts her journey of discovery. A journey that contains both celebration and utter frustration, a journey of extreme isolation, yet one of community, a journey of hope and one of hopelessness. Yet there is so much more to this book than a personal journey of an individual teacher trying to make a difference in the lives of children. Throughout its pages, *Seven Seasons in Aurukun* reveals the devastation that western culture has caused to Indigenous Australians in our unsuccessful attempts to 'westernise' them. It highlights the complexities and difficulties that now exist as both cultures try to live and work together for the betterment of Indigenous Australians, and it reveals some of the people who are committed to finding solutions.

There is no doubt, that Paula's observations and experiences will challenge the reader. At times they may move you to tears, or leave you feeling exhausted or completely frustrated, but there is no doubt that this book will leave its mark.

**Leo Wanders, Mountain District Christian School, Vic**

I am glad I read *Seven Seasons in Aurukun*. It was a challenging, yet fulfilling read about an outsider coping in a distinctly foreign environment. I felt the anger, heat, isolation and frustration Shaw experienced. Her writing took me to the place and helped me understand what taking on such a tough job might be like. I was left with a head full of questions. I have questions about what could have been done to make her time better and could be done to improve the situation for all the teachers who will come after her. I am left none the wiser as to the best way to educate Australia's indigenous children. There is no simple answer.

Having read this book I feel better able to participate in the debate currently occurring in Australia about English language education and the reasons behind some people suggesting that Aboriginal children go to boarding school.

A map showing the position of Aurukun would have been a good addition to the book.

Reading *Seven Seasons in Aurukun* has been a way of beginning to understand some of the complexities of education and life in remote Aboriginal Australia. I recommend it to all who care about Australia's indigenous people.

**Jennifer Davey, Tas**