

PAINT ME BLACK: Memories of Croker Island and Other Journeys.
By Claire Henty-Gebert. Australia: Aboriginal Studies Press. 2005. xvi, 72 pp.
(Maps, B&W photos.) US\$22.45, paper. ISBN 0-85575-399-4.

The title of this work is clearly carefully chosen, highlighting the vehicles of the story, memory and journey. So much of the telling is about the process of remembering—"I still remember the time" is a much-repeated phrase. The beautifully evocative black-and-white photos include personalized *memory* captions, such as "another day of fishing." One of the most traumatic moments in the narrative is the author's struggle to recall the forgotten: "[t]o this day I don't understand why I can't remember being taken away from my family..." (p. 8).

The writer tells the story of the "stolen generation," a term referring to the forced removal of children from their Aboriginal mothers and

communities because they were of mixed Aboriginal and European descent. This process was part of official government policy (to varying degrees) between the 1860s and 1960s. There have been many biographies that reveal the hidden trauma of this part of Australian history. Famed works in this genre include Sally Morgan's *My Place* (Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987) and Doris Pilkington (Nugi Gariamara)'s *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2002, new edition), the later now a highly emotive feature film.

Henty-Gebert's contribution to the biography genre has a unique event-driven quality. The short work propels the reader through time and space; yet, while it provides some humorous and vivid explorations of personalities that touched her life, individuals are not explored in depth or length. People are used to establish the tone and feeling of the moment. In this way the text operates as history, but does this through an innovative synthesizing of the historical and personal realms. The everyday moments of education, home making, softball and chocolate milk build on the larger community history focus of the text. Just as the content emerges as a uniting of personal and historical, the piece is structured out of two differing agendas. The fast-paced chronological trajectory is framed by the circularity of two views of Henty-Gebert's removal into state care. The beginning details her own memories and the end provides her family's perspective on the same event (and that of her now dead mother's, through eye witness testimonial). Such yoking of varying textual processes is a marker of the work's success.

Direct and effective writing characterizes the work. The second sentence of Henty-Gebert's introduction makes her underlying goal clear: "The story is based on my life long search and dream of finding my mother, my siblings, my extended family, my birth place and country, my dreaming, and my place of belonging" (p. 1). The undulating "my" reveals the emphasis on the self and conversely its fracture from wholeness, detailing the intensity of the breach at the heart of Henty-Gebert's existence in a way that no amount of heavily emotive writing could do.

Henty-Gebert's life story operates to dispel some significant social myths. The myth of "peaceful settlement," with a "lack of Indigenous resistance," is dispelled by the fact that her violent white father was killed by an Aboriginal stock worker who was later hailed as a hero. The notion that the "Aboriginal" story is defined by experiences only lived by Aboriginal people, is confounded by her compelling telling of the disaster of Cyclone Tracey in Darwin (1974) and the human struggles and camaraderie in the rebuilding of that city. The first half of the text establishes not only the removal from her mother but, importantly, the connection to Croker Island Mission as her home and place of maturation. The whole community's anguish at having to leave its Croker Island home in 1953 provides insight into the convoluted issues of double dispossession facing Aboriginal people.

It is clear that Peter Forrest's foreword to the text has two objectives,

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overtly to “provide a framework to help all Australians better understand Claire’s life story” (p. v) and covertly to reassure a white readership of the text’s scholarship and “fairness.” Both goals are unnecessary as the work’s methodology, integrity and message are self-evident. That being said, Forrest’s early comments about generosity are true in so far as the book is able to reveal disturbing truths without sentimentalizing and provides as many images of strength and survival as of pain. The work is an important contribution to Australian history and literature.

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