

Review of Crocodile Song by Nardi Simpson

Nardi Simpson's debut novel made quite a splash when it was published in September 2020. It was developed with the help of the 2018 black&write! Writing Fellowship, won the 2021 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, was short listed for the 2020 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards (Indigenous Writing), the 2021 UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Indie Books Awards (Debut Fiction) and long listed for the 2021 Miles Franklin and Stella Prizes.

I was also keen to read a debut book by an indigenous woman and member of the musical duo The Stiff Gins - a gutsy name for two accomplished musicians who combine lovely harmonies with fresh songwriting, sensitive lyrics and gentle humour.

The opening pages of *Song of the Crocodile* describe the landscape approaching and around the fictional town of Darnmoor. Without giving dates, it becomes clear the setting is a fairly typical small isolated country town in regional NSW in the mid-1950s (washing machines have just arrived in town). There's a sense of a desperate attempt at presenting a prosperous and welcoming facade while in reality it's divided by race and class, gender and ignorance. In spite of the efforts of the residents of the Campgrounds to foster loving and supportive family lives, the prejudice and discrimination faced by the indigenous community by the settler townsfolk is overt and unrelenting. The story focuses on four generations of the Billymil family to illustrate the everyday struggles of dispossession. In parallel, the spirits and ancient ancestors of this family actively participate in the story. As though hovering above, they give a commentary and interpret the action through their lore. The spirits can be both benign and malevolent and Garriya, the crocodile is the most powerful of all.

Although most of the women of this novel are strong, resourceful and generous, there's domestic abuse, alcoholism and trauma. 15yo Mili is raped by the town mayor, her father was murdered the day she is born and many young people die. The characters are at once survivors, victims and perpetrators of trauma but they also complex and nuanced, seeking joy and meaning as we all do. I enjoyed the relationship between the sisters Celie and Bess, and their mother Margaret and the way they worked so well together in the Blue Shed laundry.

I found musicality throughout the story, in voice, meter and cadence. "The flat tin roof played a soft symphony of pings and clicks as the metal stretched to greet the new day". The inclusion of Yuwaalaraay language into everyday conversations, jokes and squabbles added to the rhythm and gave it authenticity.

I found Simpson's descriptive writing the most evocative. The sky, the rivers, the flat plains, the winds, the tip and its stench and the chaos of the campgrounds. Celie wanders along the riverbank

past “the hodgepodge collections of irons sheets, flattened tin, fire buckets and drums, timber beans, fence posts and lean-tos, flapping canvases, hessian bags and worn cotton sheets”.

The parallel universe of ancestors, recently dead and spiritual animals I found much harder to navigate. It didn't seem to follow the narrative arc and I was confused about the named characters and their roles. I was however very much aware of a growing and menacing tension involving Paddy, Mili's child from the rape by Mick Murphy the mayor. Towards the end, this element of the story became quite clunky and unsubtle. At times, I thought it was incomprehensible and inaccessible. The book seems to conclude that it's the disruption of culture and the dispossession of country that is to blame for Paddy's and his generation's tragic future.

But it also offers another understanding of the universe, and an alternative history to the false pioneer myth that we've all been taught.

It offers a deeper understanding of Australia's history and tells the stories of indigenous people in a vivid and insistent tone.