

Stan Grant in the Forest

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Stan Grant

The Tears of Strangers: A Memoir

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IN A CLIMATE where race relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians have become a lapsed opportunity for genuine reconciliation, television journalist Stan Grant's *The Tears of Strangers: A Memoir* offers readers and himself alike 'healing and hope', a sentiment reinforced by the words of James Baldwin, reminding us that in the end 'we are part of each other'. In addition to this quote, Grant introduces each chapter with the words of other literary and philosophical notables, past and present, including William Blake and Salman Rushdie, alongside the poignant statements of 'unknowns' such as 'Anne Bell, Slave'.

A jacket sound-bite, provided by former *Sixty Minutes* presenter Jeff McMullen, which also mentions Baldwin, in addition to Toni Morrison, states that, in the 'tradition' of these two African-American writers, 'Stan Grant explodes many myths about race and identity. The truth sets him free.' Critiques of glowing book cover testimonies are easily performed and, on their own, are cheap copy. But, as any biography written by an Aboriginal person too often stands in place for *unwritten* history (we do stories, not history), Grant's part-autobiography may also receive currency as a legitimate representation of both Aboriginal and colonial history. This is more than the book deserves.

Rather than being a personal memoir, as the title indicates, *The Tears of Strangers* is actually a show bag of genres, including autobiography and tragedy, a populist and at times lurid historical narrative, with a few drops of tabloid journalism and Mills & Boon romance thrown into the mix.

The book provides Grant, a veteran of commercial, current-affairs style journalism and now 'anchorman' at CNN's Hong Kong desk, with the opportunity to trace his life from an at times 'fringe-camp' family existence in rural New South Wales, through the geography of an emotional and physical journey that culminates in his falling in love with colleague Tracey Holmes while on assignment somewhere in Greece prior to the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. While the scenes dealing with his and Tracey's discovery of true love provide the poorest writing in the book — 'this love called me into a forest and asked me to enter at its darkest point' — the chapters that focus on Grant's childhood and the determined

existence of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi people of his family are written in an engaging, lively and deeply emotional style. For instance, Grant's portrait of his father, Stan senior, is invaluable, highlighting the complexities of Aboriginal life in colonial and 'assimilated' Australia. These chapters additionally provide an insight into the racism of white Australia that confronts Aboriginal people. The life of Grant senior is one of hard, itinerant labour and poor wages in an effort to keep his family together; a precarious existence that is shattered by bouts of his own alcohol abuse and periods of violence, committed both by and against him.

The images presented here are the ones that often provide some in white Australia with yet another opportunity to rail against 'useless Abos'. To his credit, Grant depicts little romance here. Subsequently, the landscape of his childhood is presented with a directness that many Aboriginal people would know only too well as a version of our own 'home movies', revisiting images of the seeming contradictions of brutality, inequality, love and unity.

Grant's honest portrayal of his father, his 'hero' in the opening dedication, is the high point of the book, along with the celebration of the women in his family and community, who for too long have borne the brunt of inequalities both within and outside their own community. However, *The Tears of Strangers* is not a good book in either the way that Grant deals with issues of history (as opposed to personal memory) or in its badly constructed, tabloid-style Introduction.

Grant moves away from memoir to the role of historian-observer in several chapters of the book that deal with nineteenth-century Australia. He reproduces melodramatic narratives of the past, using primary non-Aboriginal sources (many of them written by Christian missionaries) to construct a version of eyewitness history (the tabloid journalist travelling in time?) that focuses on issues such as infanticide and the 'selling' of Aboriginal women by men in Aboriginal communities. What is problematic about this approach is not that Grant has been prepared to address the so-called 'hard issues' that historically have existed within Aboriginal communities, but that he has used the archive as good copy, with no critique of the source material itself, which has often been found to be either suspect or a fabrication.

I am not critical of Grant because he supposedly tackles issues that we would rather not discuss in a public forum, but because he shows little understanding of how to deal with colonial versions of history and the representation of Aboriginal people beyond rhetoric and an overdose of melodramatic description.

The Introduction should not have been written at all. In the final paragraph, Grant writes: 'I hesitate now as I stare at the blank page that I know will soon reveal perhaps more than I would like it to.' I suspect that this was written after the manuscript was completed. It is overladen with hyperbole dealing with Aboriginal identity, unnamed indigenous 'separatists' and a list of 'hypocrisies' performed by Aboriginal people, seemingly without being conscious of the hypocrisies that Grant himself manages. For instance, he appears both to locate an understanding of Aboriginal authenticity within the 'flyblown camps surrounded by drunks, drugs and disease' while accusing other (again unnamed) Aboriginal people of claiming 'victim status' to legitimate their own identity.

Grant questions his own loyalty to *his* people. He wonders if his material wealth brands him a traitor. He states that 'mixed blood detribalised Aborigines from the southern cities look longingly to the Northern Territory and Western Australia to regain traditions they believe they've lost'. Some do, but many don't. We know our place, and our traditions.

When Grant discusses his own life and his own family, it is clear to me that he, too, knows his place; and that he values his life as an Aboriginal person. Any question that he may be a 'traitor' just because he has kicked on is unnecessary.

At the risk of seeming melodramatic, I think this is a sad book. It could have told the story of the strength and vitality of an Aboriginal community with all the guts and honesty needed to do justice to such a story. The book is able to do this to some degree. But it could have done it better with more of the memoir and less of the self-righteous editorialising and pulp history that could have been produced for ABC's satire of commercial current affairs, *Frontline*.