

**Christobel Mattingley, *Maralinga's Long Shadow* (Allen & Unwin, 2016)**

From the moment you pick up *Maralinga's Long Shadow*, there is little doubt the book is something special. It has soft covers, with the added luxury of thick, glossy inner paper, giving it the extra heft it deserves. The back cover is decorated with beautiful Indigenous artwork, while the front cover features bright red Desert Peas overshadowed by a distant mushroom cloud. As with the outer covers, the title page is a visual feast of powerful Indigenous art, and this continues throughout the book, informing a narrative captured with simplicity and genuine empathy by the author, and adding another dimension to the colour, and black and white, photo plates.

I must admit it was impossible to resist flicking through the book before reading, to admire the intricate artwork and read the information on the picture plates. I am not suggesting, however, that this book is a lightweight table decoration. The artwork is detailed, and informed by the artist's deep love and knowledge of her subject, and the photos are a visual diary of the grace and strength of a woman and her family in the face of a shameful era in Australian history.

The story tracks the life of an Indigenous woman, from her birth at the Ooldea mission where missionaries name her Yvonne, and her mother names her Tjintjiwara; to her teenage years when her first baby was taken from her; onwards to marriage and unwitting exposure to radiation with her husband at Maralinga, and finally through an adult life spent giving to others through creativity and community enhancement.

It is hard to read Yvonne's story without feeling outrage at the treatment meted out to the traditional owners of the land surrounding Maralinga, because her story also involves a national story about the criminal disregard shown to our first people by the Australian Government in the 1960s. As the events of Maralinga unfold, there is no sense of consideration for the Indigenous people's rights, culture or humanity. To add insult to injury the 'newly formed Yalata Community Council was granted salvage rights to Maralinga' and when they enquired about the safety of the area, they were 'assured there was no cause for concern' (57). The salvage crew took blankets and utensils left by the army and distributed them among the community, unaware that the dust on the items was toxic (58). Yvonne, her husband, and their young children stayed at Maralinga longer than any other family, and she said,

Mens were itchy from pulling buildings down, scratching all night. Later came out in sores all over their chests. I seen the men working trying to cover drums over, full of poison. Whitefellas all had masks and protective clothing. White boots, gloves, hoods, goggles, overalls. But none Anangu. Anangu men had nothing. My husband just had ordinary clothes and they made him drive front-end loader to bring drums of poison ... they should have given him something to put over his mouth. (64-5)

Unfortunately, most of the community members who were involved in the salvage at Maralinga experienced life-threatening illnesses and early mortality.

One shouldn't imagine, however, that this is a narrative steeped in self-pity and anger, because in spite of the hardships and unfairness suffered by Yvonne and her family, there is little sign of anger and resentment. In fact, the mix of photos and stories reveal a woman of dignity and compassion, with a ready smile and helping hand for anyone in need. There are also moments of rejoicing in the book, for example when Yvonne is finally reunited with her and her husband's firstborn son who was taken from her by officials without her consent.

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Yvonne has the starring role in this story, but her story is also the story of a community that has lost fathers, mothers, siblings and children, and also their land and cultural heritage, because of a short-sighted act of callous bureaucracy. I believe this book should be mandatory reading in every school in Australia because its real power resides within its subject, Yvonne, and her ability to maintain her humanity, and build community through compassion, love, and strength in the face of terrible hardships and unreasonable odds.

**Kathleen Steele**