
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Cassandra Pybus prefaces her book *Raven Road* with a quote from Tim Flannery: ‘Ravens are, it seems, one of Australia’s few successful animal exports.’ They began in Australia millions of years ago, he says, and made their way via Eurasia into North America and beyond. Pybus uses this widely-travelled bird to symbolise her own quixotic journey in pursuit of the true story of a woman who had travelled alone across northwestern Canada and Alaska seventy years before. The centrality of the raven to indigenous creation myths also adds another dimension to what is more than just a travel book.

Lillian Alling was a Polish or Russian immigrant to North America during the 1920s. She appeared in the remote, rugged terrain of British Columbia in September 1927, and although her English was bad, she was understood to say that she was walking to Siberia. Pybus first came across Lillian’s story when browsing in a bookshop on an earlier visit to Canada. She sought out other accounts of Lillian’s trek, the historian in her doubting while the storyteller wanted to believe. *Raven Road* is the record of her slow, frustrating and ultimately inconclusive search for information about Lillian’s fate, and the real reason for her foolhardy, super-human undertaking – walking through unforgiving country which had defeated countless others. On the way Pybus tells the stories of some of the victims of this inhospitable wilderness – some on a quest for the North West Passage, some in search of gold; others, later on, seeking enlightenment and fulfillment in a wilderness
which has no mercy on such hubristic visions. Overhearing a fractious back-packing couple arguing loudly one night in a youth hostel, she is moved to wonder, ‘how is it that people get persuaded that this kind of travelling is fun?’

There is more to Raven Road than historical research and travelogue. Pybus travelled with an old girlfriend, Gerry, who was to manage the four wheel drive. They had known each other for more than twenty years but had been out of touch for some time, and the book charts the slow but inevitable decline of their friendship as their different habits and preoccupations become more and more difficult to reconcile. Gerry’s uneasy relationship with food – bingeing on junk food and constantly fretting about calories – offends Cassandra’s healthy enjoyment of fresh, well-prepared meals, until Cassandra herself starts to find narratives of hunger and starvation everywhere she looks, even in the in-flight movie on the plane back to Australia. And Gerry clearly has little interest in the research which absorbs Cassandra’s interest. Eventually they part:

As I contemplate the road not taken, I ask myself why everything had gone so very wrong? Perhaps it was doomed from the outset. The trip was always going to be determined by my priorities and shaped by my intellectual concerns: by my compulsive need to share my research. I was quite the wrong kind of person to be travelling with a woman desperate to be on the underside of forty. For Gerry to find herself with a travel companion who was over fifty, unconcerned about her body image and unable to resist turning everything into an object lesson must have been more than she could bear. Too bad for Gerry.

One of Gerry’s envious complaints about Cassandra is that she is smug and secure in her marriage. And indeed the emotional force underlying this book,
rather than being the solidarity of two women braving the wilderness, shoulder to shoulder, is Pybus’s relationship with her husband, Michael. Michael’s love and support provide the stability which gives her the confidence to venture out and pursue her obsessions, and her phone calls home to Tasmania are as much part of the narrative as her forays into these subarctic regions. So in a way this is a love story, the last chapter titled ‘Nothing Else Matters’ concluding with the couple’s reunion at Sydney airport. And appropriately Pybus manages to dispense a happy marriage to her elusive subject Lillian as well, finding a last piece of evidence which implies that she had met a man on her trek and had settled down with him in the back woods of the Yukon.

I felt at first that Pybus’s style was a little uneven – sometimes shamelessly clichéd and colloquial, while at other times evoking sharply the equal measures of beauty and devastation she witnessed, or conveying her thoughts and feelings with self-deprecating wit. After reading for a while I realised that this was quite deliberate. She recounts frankly what others might omit, her husband’s embarrassing but clearly not unwelcome endearments like ‘honey bunny’ revealing the vulnerable side of this highly intelligent and capable woman. All in all Raven Road is an absorbing book, combining an historical quest with a witty and evocative travelogue and a personal argosy of considerable grace and candour.