

ANNA THE GOANNA by JILL MCDUGALL

reviewed by **Margaret Merrilees**

Published *Australian Book Review* No. 224, Sept 2000

This collection of poems is a joy from the moment you see the cover picture. A goanna on a bike is racing through the desert at the head of a pack of dogs and kids, all with their tongues hanging out.

ANNA THE GOANNA is the result of Jill McDougall's ten years of teaching in remote Aboriginal communities. One of the difficulties was the lack of any reading materials that were at all relevant to the children's lives. So the writer set out to create her own. The poems she wrote have all been well and truly tested out by her students.

From all accounts the book has been heartily welcomed by other teachers in the same situation. It is already being used as a resource for reconciliation discussions in schools. There is no doubt that it fills a gap.

However its impact goes beyond the classroom. For those of us in the city there's an additional joy. It gives us a glimpse of life in those remote communities that very few of us will ever see for ourselves. And it's a warm lively world that emerges from the poems. The effect is increased enormously by Jenny Taylor's funny zippy illustrations full of the reds and oranges of central Australia, with lots of sky.

The poems were written in a number of different places. A sort of composite community emerges, mainly based in the desert, though the occasional crocodile belongs further north. But the essential features of a community, both physical and cultural, are clear.

*We had a race
From PJ's place,
And I went first
With heaps of pace,
Past the clinic,
Past the store
Past a dozen dogs
Or more.....
(from **THE BIKE RIDE**)*

And sure enough, there in the picture is the store, plonked in the red dirt with a few straggly trees, a four wheel drive, crows overhead and a lot of kids and dogs. Instantly recognisable as a desert community.

MY SISTER'S SALARY is a counting game in which a little girl gathers more and more friends on her way to the store with fifty dollars from her sister's pay. The picture shows the children rushing along thinking of a multitude of treats from chips to a banana to sausages (the dream of the dog at the tail end of the queue). They all choose something and there's still enough for three chops to take back to Gran's.

The poems do not ignore some of the harder aspects of Aboriginal life.

"Sad boys are sniffing,"

*Says the poster on the wall.
My brother is a sad boy,
and he never smiles at all.....
(from **SAD BOYS**)*

The reference is to Vanessa Nampijinpa Brown's poster, and the continuing problem of petrol sniffing.

In another poem a trip to town is spoiled by drunks. As with the sniffing, we glimpse the unhappiness that might lie behind the drinking.

*Too many drunks,
In too many places,
Too many hard times,
On too many faces.
(from **TOO MANY DRUNKS**)*

The poems vary in length and style. Two satisfyingly long ballads celebrate the triumphs of softball and football teams. A fable about fire describes a kangaroo and a cockatoo who build their campfire too big, with disastrous results. The grisly fate of the heroes and the consequent moral are appropriate to the environment and satisfying to a child's sense of justice.

At the other end of the scale are some pithy little verses.

*My father goes hunting for turkey
My brother goes hunting for toys,
My mum and my nanna,
Go hunting goanna,
But sister goes hunting for boys!
(**GOING HUNTING**)*

The book is full of animals. Kangaroos, goannas, smaller lizards, snakes, crocodiles, crows, cockatoos, mosquitoes, flies and most of all dogs. Dogs everywhere!

These poems are positive and energetic, with satisfying rhymes and repetition. They beg to be read aloud, which was their intention of course. They also encourage performance and dancing.

The poem called **GOING HOME** best sums up the warmth of this collection. Three aunties are waiting by a campfire ready to make tea. There they sit, in the dirt, solid and dignified in their rugged clothes and beanies, the epitome of comfort and welcome. They seem to promise a life where everyone will be included, a community anchored by the older people and made lively by hordes of children and animals.

And that is the huge appeal of this book for those of us, young or old, who live fragmented urban lives. In our hearts don't we still long for someone to be waiting down the track for us with the billy boiling?

Jill McDougall (illus. Jenny Taylor) *Anna the Goanna* Aboriginal Studies Press 2000