

Tatz, Colin (2001) Aboriginal Suicide is Different – A Portrait of Life and Self-Destruction, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Report Series

Let me do it straight up for those who hate reading reviews or cannot be bothered to read reviews — this is an excellent book. Buy it and read it!

Now for those more patient souls.

This is a study of youth who have, or feel they have, no purpose in life — or who may be 'seeking freedom in death'. It is a portrait of self-destruction by young Aboriginal men and women. The focus is on suicide by Maori, Pacific Islanders, Canadian and American Indians, people who have endured similar, but not identical, histories as racial minorities in colonial systems. (p ix)

We are taken on a social autopsy of Aboriginal suicide and, as a consequence of that, Aboriginal history. I do have some slight quibbles with Professor Tatz but only in his description of the outcomes of the Deaths in Custody Inquiry. Whilst it is known that the Royal Commission found no custodial/police/prison medical officer guilty, this does not mean that foul play did not occur.

Whilst I am far from being an expert on anything, let alone suicide, I do wonder at the argument put by Tatz that suicide is unknown, or not a part of, Aboriginal culture. I am always troubled by that sort of umbrella statement. When we attempt to look at pre-invasion culture of the hundreds of Nations or Tribes that covered Australia then I would at least argue that the concept, or the white medical/mental health concept (which Tatz correctly refutes), of suicide cannot be transposed or overlaid into the Traditional Cultures. For example, if not an 'individual act', suicide may have been known as a 'communal act'. I am reminded of the Inuit/Alaskan Mobs whereby the old and sick would wander off to die during times of food shortages. I believe some Amerindian Tribes have done likewise. Perhaps suicide, in whatever form it took or how it was defined, was a taboo subject and neither spoken of or remembered.

This at times can be a hard book to read, or at least I found it so. Others, perhaps more clinical types, will read it with ease. The examples and background notes of eight-year-old children who have attempted suicide and the examples of the children of the Stolen Generations who self-harm and continually attempt suicide are quite startling and horrendous.

Our kids, our Aboriginal kids, are not just classified as thieves or drug runners, as Society continually informs us. They also die by their own choice. I would argue that it would be rare for a non-Aboriginal child of eight to have participated in the death rituals of today's religions. Our eight-year-olds are mostly old hands at the funeral rituals. I have been to funerals where children under 12 months are burying their Mother or Father. By the time our kids are eight they would have been to over five funerals during their short life. From such attendances comes a greater and closer relationship with Death. A relationship with very little, if any, fear.

Our extended Families are not only our strength, they are also our major grief. As Professor Marcia Langton told the RCIADIC — ‘Too much Sorry Business’. Our youth continually grieve, as do the Families. The total lack of cultural grief counselling throughout Australia only adds to the burden. There is also a dearth of grief counsellors with cultural knowledge to assist Death in Custody Families. All 350 plus since 1980.

In the quotes at the beginning of this review, Tatz uses the words — ‘seeking freedom in death’. The somewhat noble idea that this raises in no way reflects the reality of using others, generally the trigger happy cops, to take one’s life. This phenomenon was classically expounded in the 1993 film ‘Blackfellas’ whereby the character played by David Ngoombujarra, ‘Prettyboy’ Floyd Davey, uses a bungled robbery and a childhood game to have himself shot by the police. His final words — ‘Free, free. Free as a fucken’ bird!’

Professor Colin Tatz has written a book that will create argument and discussion for many, many years to come. And rightly so. Its 225 pages, an appendix of Communities and Sites visited, (both here and Overseas), an excellent Bibliography for those interested in this field of study and analysis, and a workable index puts this work in the must buy/read category.

I could have written much, much more but the tyranny of time and review space is against this happening. For those interested I direct you to another book written on this topic which is not mentioned in the Bibliography. I trust this does not offend the Professor. *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* by Richard Trudgen, published by the Aboriginal Resource Development Inc., which I believe is based in the Northern Territory.

Happy reading.

Ray Jackson

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