



Kimberley Society

Book Review

***In the desert: Jimmy Pike as a boy* by Pat Lowe. Penguin Books (Australia), Camberwell (Vic), 2007. Paperback, 172 pages, illustrated, ISBN 13: 9780143003083, RRP \$18.95.**

This comparatively short book, written by the Kimberley Society member who will be [our February 2008 speaker](#), is interesting on several levels. It opens with very readable explanatory material in which a foreword (11 pages) tells how the book came into being and how the author sought to present the late Jimmy Pike's account of his early life as faithfully as she could. A 15-page introduction then describes the practices, beliefs and discipline that governed the lives of Aboriginal people in the Great Sandy Desert in the 1940s and 1950s. The desert is depicted in a map positioned opposite the first page of the preface. The reader who starts from page 1 thus acquires an excellent grounding before he or she reads about the formative years of a man who became one of Australia's best-known Aboriginal artists.

Pat Lowe's skill as an award-winning author is evident throughout the book. She relates some of the stories in Jimmy's words and others as she recalls them. She also provides context for each story. The result is a seamless blending of stories about a boy's life with facts about indigenous culture and survival.

Pat's familiarity with the desert, gained through living there with Jimmy for the best part of four years, is evident. So, too, is her somewhat reluctant acceptance of 'the sort of callousness necessary to the hunter'.

No attempt has been made to date the stories, or to put them into chronological order. To have done so would have carried the risk of getting the dates and the sequence wrong. A logical progression exists, however, and it reveals the gradual fashion in which the Walmajarri and other desert people, influenced by both coercion and a desire to experience new things, moved towards the sheep and cattle stations on the south side of the Fitzroy River. It also touches on the interaction that occurred between the desert people and others (indigenous and non-indigenous) who worked on the stations.

In reading this book, I particularly appreciated its balanced delivery of information about things that include the exodus of the Walmajarri people from the desert. Life with Jimmy Pike opened Pat Lowe's eyes to a culture vastly different to her English upbringing. Keenly interested in his experiences and his country, she gleaned extensive knowledge of both. Her work as a psychologist no doubt helped to turn that knowledge into a book but, without her finely honed writing skills, it would not have been such an interesting read.

Pat Lowe's mastery of the written word is evident in the breadth of her output. Her other works include the Penguin novels *The Girl with No Name* and *Feeling the Heat*. The latter book won the 2003 WA Premier's Literary Award in the Young Adults category. She had previously written *The Boab Tree* (Thomas C. Lothian Pty Ltd, Port Melbourne, 1998) and a suite of books with Jimmy Pike -- *Jilji: Life in the Great Sandy Desert* (Magabala Books, Broome, 1990), *Yinti: Desert Child* (Magabala, 1992), *Desert Dog* (Magabala, 1997), *Jimmy and Pat meet the Queen* (Backroom Press, Broome, 1997), and *Desert Cowboy* (Magabala, 2000). More recently there has been *Two Sisters: The stories of Jukana & Ngarta* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2004) in which Pat told Ngarta's story while Jukana wrote in the Walmajarri language and had her life story translated by Eirlys Richards.

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