

Dear Brother: The Harrowing Life Journey of Archie Roach

Awaye! 16th November 2019

The man has been described as ‘the voice of Australia’. In this interview, recorded in the Seymour Centre in Sydney in 2019, Archie Roach tells us why he decided to write it all down in his incredible memoir, *Tell Me Why*. He opens up for the first time about his foster family, the Coxes, and the crushing letter he received as a schoolboy that set him on the course to find his true identity. *Tell Me Why* is epic – it’s a story of survival against all the odds; of recovery from addiction, of the friendship, love, and eventually family that Archie found down city streets. It’s also about forgiveness, and the healing power of music.

Can I just say, this memoir *Tell Me Why* is one of the best I’ve

ever read. It's the story of a broken country and a life renewed, of finding your way, no matter what forces rise against you. It also strikes at the heart of the idea of truth telling. It's personal and it's political; you can't read this book without confronting the truth. I was very lucky to read this book in manuscript form and the humility and the compassion and the authentic voice of this amazing man sings out, it leaps off every single page. This book is not just a memoir, it's part of our national story.

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Archie, in the prologue there's a note that gets delivered to you when you're at school in outer Melbourne 1970 and it triggers much of what happens in the story, your life story. And it's a letter from one of your sisters, Myrtle, and the return address ...

One Toxteth Road, Glebe, up the road.

Number one Toxteth Road, which is not too far from where we sit, across the road, across the park. What's it like being back here? Because you lived here, you spent a lot of time in Belmore Park. You know these streets very well.

It's a little surreal actually, being here. At this very moment, we're talking about a memoir and the letter which I received from my sister Myrtle with the return address being just up the road, it's peculiar, so I'm feeling, yeah.

Before you got that note, you weren't Archie Roach. You were some other person. You were ...

Gamay-gundul, juri-buyuhl

(Big Canoe/Floating Mountain)

by Daniel Browning

On 15 May 1770 the barque *Endeavour* rounds the cape, the easternmost point of the continent. The botanist Joseph Banks is spying on the Ancestors from the deck of the ship with the use of a terrestrial telescope. On the shore, the Ancestor – a fit young man with superhuman abilities including long-range vision and acute hearing, known as Nyahbunyahrah – returns his gaze. A telepath with extra sensory perception, he sits crossed-legged, sage-like and immovable, camouflaged by thick scrub. This dialogue is partly based on the entry in Banks' journal, and that of Lieutenant James Cook. As far as we know, their brief observations are the first appearance of Bundjalung people in the historical record written by Europeans. Banks and Cook are struck by one thing: the Ancestors appear to be completely unfazed by the *Endeavour*, as if they don't see it.

NYAHBUNYARAH: I see you, whiteman.

BANKS: (*watching the Ancestors closely, but he doesn't see Nyahbunyah. He seems frustrated*)

These people.

N: (*Pointing his head in a northerly direction*)

Keep goin'.

B: I can not account for this behaviour.

N: I can hear you too. My binungs are like antennae. [*pause*]

Dagai, I heard that budjing. (*Smiles toothily*)

My binungs are alert to every blip, every crunch – every suppressed fart – every sonic note in the acoustic environment. Let me put it like this: You hear a monologue, but I hear a symphony. [*pause*]

My mil – well, they can read this country like that eagle up there, my personal totem. I got my meat from that old man. Him that named me Nyahbunyah.

When my grandmothers wiped me clean, it was the old man who saw the rapid movement and the searching in my eyes ... It was as if they had a central nervous system and a digestive one – an appetite that only seeing could satisfy. The cells in my retinas are like overactive brains – seeing, *and* comprehending.

B: What child's game are they playing?

N: No games.