



## **Book Club Book of the Month June 2019**

### ***A Stolen Life: The Bruce Trevorrow Case, Antonio Buti* (Fremantle Press)**

#### **Summary**

Antonio Buti's *A Stolen Life* charts the circumstances behind the removal of Ngarrinjderi man Bruce Trevorrow from his family as a baby by the South Australian Aboriginal Protection Board, and the consequences that removal set in train. Using a shifting point-of-view that describes Bruce's life and the perspectives of the legal team that mounted Australia's first successful Stolen Generations legal claim against a state government, as well as the Justice who oversaw the case, *A Stolen Life* is a triumph of marrying incredibly detailed research with deep characterisation and narrative intrigue. Written in a clear style that belies the complexity of the material, *A Stolen Life* is also an insiders' view of how the legal system operates and a fitting testament to the heroic efforts of Trevorrow, his family and legal team in the face of apparently insurmountable odds.

#### **About the author**

Dr Antonio Buti is a Western Australian writer who is also the Member for Armadale in the Legislative Assembly of the WA Parliament. He is a Senior Honorary Fellow at the University of Western Australia's Law School and the

author of three previous works: *Brothers: Justice, Corruption and the Mickelbergs* (Fremantle Press, 2011), *Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience* (UWAP, 2007) and *Separated: Aboriginal Childhood Separations and Guardianship Law* (Sydney Institute of Criminology, 2004).

## Questions for discussion

- Discuss the case of Bruce Trevorrow in the light of what you know about similar Western Australian state government assimilationist policies subsequent to the 1905 Act, and how these have been reflected in texts such as Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (1996), Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), Stephen Kinnane's *Shadow Lines* (2003) or Anna Haebich's *For Their Own Good* (1988).
- Discuss the political context in the various state jurisdictions which made the removal of the children that became known as the Stolen Generation possible in the first place? How did this play out in Trevorrow's removal from a hospital bed to a foster family without his parents' consent, and in the subsequent justifications for this act?
- Bruce Trevorrow's case brought against the state government of South Australia was the first successful claim as part of the Stolen Generation victim's seeking redress. As described by the author, why had earlier claims failed?
- The author painstakingly recreates the story of Bruce's removal from his family by telling the story from the position of an omniscient narrator, charting the circumstances of his early years, his illness and subsequent hospitalisation, and thereafter his difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. What else does this use of an omniscient narratorial perspective enable the author do in terms of providing historical and legal context?
- *A Stolen Life* is clearly deeply researched over many years. How has this research been integrated into the narrative in terms of characterisation? What kind of access to subjects such as Justice Grey and Trevorrow's legal team would be required to achieve this?
- There are many heroes (such as Joanna Richardson) in this story. Who are they, in your opinion, and what motivates them?
- *A Stolen Life* is a non-fiction story. Why do you think the author has built the story using a 'four part' structure? What does this structure

achieve in terms of building suspense, and how is it similar to a traditional fictional narrative?

- Fictional courtroom dramas achieve a high degree of suspense and intrigue by representing the clash of oppositional characters and competing 'truths' within the framework of a 'winner-takes-all' system. How has the author charted a similar course with this narrative, while maintaining the important supplementary need to relay information crucial to the outcome of the case?
- At varying times the author uses words such as 'performance', 'plot', 'story' and 'narrative' to describe the job of the competing legal teams as they attempt to influence the Justice's final decision. Indeed, Justice Gray's verdict is also a species of story, in the sense that it is a painstakingly written document that aims to achieve a certain effect. How effective, in your opinion, were the opposing sides in terms of creating their competing narratives? How did this affect the outcome of the case?
- Did you agree with the verdict in this case, and do you think that the amount of compensation awarded to Bruce Trevorow was fair?
- How do the themes and practices of this historical case relate to current governmental policies in terms of child protection and the Northern Territory intervention, for example? Have 'we' as a society come a long way, or is there still a long way to go?

### **If you liked this book, you may also like...**

Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (UQP, 1996)

Kim Scott's *Benang* (Fremantle Press, 1999)

Stephen Kinnane's *Shadow Lines* (Fremantle Press, 2003)

Anna Haebich's *For Their Own Good* (UWAP, 1988).