



Book Club Book of the Month: December 2020

Not Always Diplomatic: An Australian Woman's Journey through International Affairs, Sue Boyd (UWA Publishing)

Summary

Not Always Diplomatic is the life story of West Australian Sue Boyd, a remarkable pioneer in international diplomacy. Educated at thirteen schools across five continents, Boyd continued her globe-trotting as an adult, working as a diplomat in countries as diverse as East Germany, Vietnam and Fiji, as well as periods in Canberra and at the United Nations. Packed with quirky anecdotes, humorous details and important background context, this memoir demonstrates the changing role of women in Australian international affairs, while also recording Boyd's many noteworthy achievements.

About the author

Sue Boyd was born in India and travelled as a young child before volunteering in Africa and then migrating with her family to Western Australia in 1966. She completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Western Australia, working part-time as a journalist, and joined the Department of External Affairs in Canberra in 1970. Boyd's career took her to many different

countries, with her heading up Australian diplomatic missions in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Fiji. In 2003, she left the diplomatic service and returned to live in Perth, where she sits on a number of boards and is active in community engagement.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you think Boyd's childhood and youth prepared her for a life as a diplomat, or were her temperament and interests the key driving forces?
2. What role did humour play in Boyd's life as a diplomat and in being the only woman in certain meetings and roles in her early career? What other strategies did she use to manage sexism?
3. How did the systemic discrimination against women in the diplomatic service change over the years of Boyd's career? Discuss her analysis of being a single woman in diplomatic circles.
4. Looking back many years after her volunteer service in Africa, Boyd describes herself as a product of her time and place, "a little, racist, white supremacist" (p. 40). What do you think of this self-reflection? How much does she change throughout the book and is this a familiar story for Australians of her age?
5. How does Boyd's description of her time in East Germany, and her subsequent reading of the Stasi file they kept on her, influence your understanding of East Germany in the 1970s and 1980s? How does Boyd's analysis compare with Anna Funder's in her book *Stasiland*?
6. Boyd was Australian High Commissioner in Fiji at the time of the Speight coup, involving her in complex crisis negotiations and posing a threat to her life. How do you feel she handled this situation?
7. What role does art play in Boyd's life and in her memoir?
8. What did you find the most interesting parts of this book and why?
9. Boyd planned her post-public service life in Perth carefully. How accurate are the comments made to her by a recruitment consultant who

noted that the business scene in Perth is very male-dominated? Has this changed over the past decade or so?

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

We Can't Say We Didn't Know: Dispatches from an Age of Impunity, Sophie McNeill (ABC Books)

Finding My Place: From Cairo to Canberra - the irresistible story of an irrepressible woman, Anne Aly (ABC Books)

Always Another Country: a memoir of exile and home, Sisonke Msimang (Text Publishing)

Diary of a Foreign Minister, Bob Carr (NewSouth Books)

Women in Leadership, Julia Gillard and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Penguin Books)

Unfettered and Alive, Anne Summers (Allen & Unwin)