



Book Club Book of the Month March 2021 ***God, the Devil and Me, Alf Taylor (Magabala Books)***

Summary

In this unique and highly entertaining autobiography, Alf Taylor chronicles his life growing up in the infamous New Norcia Mission, north of Perth in the fifties and sixties.

At once darkly humorous and achingly tragic, *God, The Devil and Me* tells of the life and desperation of the young children forced into the care of the Spanish Nuns and Brothers who ran the Mission. Their lives made up of varying degrees of cruelty and punishments, these children were the 'little black devils' that God and religion forgot. Written with an acerbic and brutal wit, Taylor intersperses dark childhood memories with a Monty Pythonesque retelling of the Bible, in which Peter is an alcoholic and Judas is a good guy.

As a child, underfed, poorly clothed and missing his family, Taylor sought refuge in the library in the company of Shakespeare and Michelangelo. He writes with joy about the camaraderie of the boys, their love of sport and their own company, but also notes that many descended into despair upon leaving. Most died early. Alf Taylor is one of the 'lucky ones'.

About the Author

Born in the late 1940s to Rosendo Taylor and Queenie Harris (whose mother belonged to the Ngadu people in the Norseman area), Alf Taylor was taken from his family when he was about four and grew up in the Spanish Benedictine Mission at New Norcia, north of Perth. He left (escaped, he would say) the Mission when he was fifteen and did seasonal work around Perth and Geraldton. He was in the armed forces, married and divorced, and had seven children.

Taylor began writing for publication later in life and has published widely in magazines. As well as two books of poetry, *Singer Songwriter* (1992) and *Winds* (1994), he has also published a volume of short stories, *Long Time Now* (2001), which was translated into Spanish in 2006. In *God, the Devil and Me* he characterises himself as 'an observer of life' and his writers' lens is directed at both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal life in Australia.

Questions for discussion

1. The poems at the beginning of the book and the Foreword each provide an introduction to Taylor's story. How did they affect your reading?
2. Taylor uses different styles to tell his story, ranging from passages of outright anger to ones of heightened lyricism; from parody to the most brutal realism. Examine some of these styles and the ways they affect you as a reader in relation to the experience being shared by Taylor.
3. Consider the extensive use of humour in the narrative. How does it affect the story? What do you, as a reader, interpret as its purpose?
4. Think about the ways the dreams in the book contrast with the life being lived. What do the imaginative, and imagined, life tell you about Taylor's mental and physical state?
5. Memoir, as Dennis Haskell notes in his Foreword, is widely used by Aboriginal writers. Compare this work with another Indigenous memoir you're familiar with.
6. *God, the Devil and Me* is episodic and non-linear. As a memoir, a memory narrative, this perhaps indicates the ways memory affords flashes of a past. It may also relate to the extreme difficulty the narrator had making a narrative out of such a past. Discuss the significance of the book's narrative structure.
7. Race and religion are two predominant topics of the book. How and in what ways are they discussed?

8. There are lots of incidental stories in the memoir. What is their place? Look at several and at how they work, either on their own or in relation to the narrative as a whole.
9. Learning to read, then finding his ability to write, is central to Alf Taylor's life both as a child and adult. How is this experience presented in the memoir?
10. How would you characterise the narrative voice in *God, the Devil and Me*?

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