

Book Reviews

Marianas Islands Legends

Compiled by Bo Flood

Illustrations by Connie J. Adams

The Bess Press, 2001, 194 pages, paperback, \$14.95.

Reviewed by Laura L. Post, MD

Although my own ancestors are European, albeit ostracized refugees from Eastern Europe and Jewish at that, I can not pretend to fully understand the experience of people of color. Although I live among tribal indigenous islanders on Saipan, and have spent much of my life in what might be termed 'ghettoes' of ethnicity, financial status and class, I do not think that I will ever fully understand the experience of people of color. Although I actively and assertively support my friends – and enemies – who were born from African, Asian, Native, Pacific Islander, Latin heritages, all the while recognizing and acknowledging that they are the majority and I among the minority group, I cannot imagine ever fully living the experience of people of color.

That said, this is not a book about divisions. Or even about race, even though a casual reader might wonder at the whiteness of the authors and the coloredness of the contributors. This is a good and valuable and interesting book. In the same vein and tone as her previous offerings, *From the Mouth of the Monster Eel* and *Pacific Island Legends: Tales from Micronesia, Polynesia and Australia*, Dr. Flood (as well as being a writer, she has a degree in psychology), this compilation is a showcase in which local and regional stories represent folkloric tradition.

Just as the Foreword frames this volume in a proper historical context, so the Introduction provides an political-geographical perspective. The theme of 'respetu,' or respect, throughout, addresses and calms any lingering doubts about the intentions of these women to simply give, offer, make available. Most of the stories are short, and simple. Poignant and meaningful. Meant to be told and retold. Captured here in printed form perhaps for a new audience raised on books rather than a younger generation receiving on beauty and wisdom in oral form from older relatives.

Inevitably, the stories address the vastness of the ocean, its moods and foods and currents. There is magic, and there are ceremonies. Prayers for goodness, potions for evil; rituals, healing and exploration, dancing and honoring and being contemplatively still. Stories told to the authors and their collaborators, children and elders. Chamorro and Carolinian.

I enjoyed all of this book and yet was surprised at how much of it was recorded/retold by the authors, perhaps rewritten, edited, translated from a verbal language into one on a page. From Lino Olopai, one of the treasured individuals of the Marianas, to Elizabeth Drumwright, a poet whose original entry somehow manifested spirits through her words, the range is large the depth great, and the relevance undeniable.

Kisses in the Nederends

Epeli Hau'ofa

Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

Reviewed by Dirk Anthony Ballendorf

This book, originally published in 1987, is one the reader will embrace with enthusiasm, or reject with disdain. There seems no middle ground. Editor Vilsoni Hereniko says it all in his foreword note: *Kisses in the Nederends* is not for the fainthearted. Unlike Hau'ofa's much-celebrated *Tales of the Tikongs* with its "acceptable humor," *Kisses* is "raw" and therefore likely to offend some people. A novel entirely about an anus? And by a Pacific islander from God fearing Tonga in the South Pacific? If we persevere to the end,

however, we realize *Kisses* has important things to say about the complexity of the contemporary Pacific as it grapples with issues of tradition and modernity, self-reliance and dependency, imperialism and exploitation. Moving beyond our initial discomfort requires an

understanding of the inspiration and the context of this work. Hence the interview with the author that appears at the end of the novel.

Hau'ofa's account of his own personal tragedy goes a long way toward helping the reader appreciate this extraordinary contribution to Pacific and world literature. It also helps us to see more clearly the relationship between personal experience and creativity, and how important it is for writers to speak with their own unique voice, even when it leads to persecution by society's moral keepers, or alienation from their friends and community.

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By daring to dance in the "middle of our zones of taboo," Hau'ofa has written a novel that is reminiscent of the so-called licentious dances that came under heavy censure by early missionaries in the Pacific. Like these ancestral dances of unbounded joy that celebrated pleasure and desire, this novel portrays a way of being and talking that many Pacific islanders will recognize as part of our identity as peoples of the land and sea. The difference is that Hau'ofa has revealed a sensibility and behavior that is usually appreciated and enjoyed by islanders only when they are among themselves. No doubt some insiders will take issue with Hau'ofa for exposing a part of their identity that fundamental Christianity is supposed to have eradicated long ago.

Hau'ofa's decent into the erogenous region between the hip and the thigh and the view he offers us from this lowly position is for the purpose of helping us to see our predicaments as though for the first time. This what sets this novel apart from other works from the Pacific: the absurdity and improbability of Hau'ofa's tale, and the unbridled laughter that pervades this ultimately serious critique of modern life.

Hau'ofa's knowledge and experience of the Pacific, its languages and its peoples is exceptional. His western training in anthropology, his intellectual involvement in regional and international affairs, and his sense of the absurd meld in this tale to celebrate and satirize our "collective fears and phobias." Hau'ofa gazes into his arse and sees its beauty, a beauty, he believes, can save us from ourselves.

Should we take Hau'ofa seriously? Given Hau'ofa's reputation as a satirist and comic writer, as well as an intellectual and visionary, we stand to benefit by empathizing with Oilei Bomboki as he sets out to find a cure to his pain.

It's a good bet that Kisses in the Nederends will be read and be around for a long time. ■

Aids came
From the cracks in the sky
First it was democracy
Now it is cheque diplomacy
From: Cracks in the sky by S.A. Finau