



### Book Review

Nancy de Vries, Gaynor Macdonald, Jane Mears and Anna Nettheim. **One Life, Two Stories: Nancy de Vries' journey home**. Sydney: Darlington Press, 2012. 196 pages, pb. ISBN 9781921364259.

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Nancy de Vries, Aboriginal activist, nurse, Aboriginal health campaigner and author (1932–2006) was a survivor who learned to draw strength from adversity throughout her life. Removed from her mother at only 14 months of age, Nancy became the public face of the Stolen Generations in NSW when in 1997 she acknowledged the State Government's apology to the Aboriginal people of Australia in a ceremony at the NSW Legislative Assembly.

Nancy de Vries had a close association with the University of Western Sydney where she had graduated as a nurse in 1998 and, from connections she developed there, was often invited to speak to students of her life as an Aboriginal person. That is where her two-decade friendship with Associate Professor Jane Mears and Dr Gaynor Macdonald began. Inspired by Nancy themselves, they began to record her lectures and did further

interviews with her that total some 60 hours of recordings. This significant record was supplemented by archival and historical research to produce a book that is an extraordinary autobiography and also much more.

I had the honour of being asked to launch *One Life, Two Stories* at the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, on Tuesday 12th June 2012. Having read the book in a short period of time just before launching it I felt almost overwhelmed by a need to mark the life of this remarkable woman in such a way as to do her justice. She is a towering figure in NSW history.

The title *One life, two stories* comes from Nancy de Vries herself. It registers the shock and stress that occurs when a person reads the comments of others on the character and personality of a small developing child, that was in fact the child that was you! Nancy de Vries had difficulty recognizing the story of her that was documented in the files of the bureaucracy charged with her “protection” after her removal from her mother. She had one life that she lived to her own knowledge and identity; this life was made disjunctured through the intervention of others who were not kin and who had no real investment in the support of this child. These authority figures had their own “story” of her. One value of this book is this juxtaposition of the two “lives” alongside each other: it challenges the supremacy of the written word and the archive, showing how distorted histories written through such filters can be.

Nancy de Vries’s life mirrors the experience of many Aboriginal children taken into “care” in NSW. Five years with her first foster family was the longest period she spent in one place before her 18th birthday, the age at which she was no longer subject to the control of the state. During her childhood she was sent to eight different foster homes as well as many institutions. These included: Bidura Children's Home in Glebe, Parramatta Girls Home, Callan Park Hospital, Cootamundra Girls Home and Moonaculla Aboriginal Station, near Deniliquin. She was sent to Moonaculla as punishment but fortuitously, her hopes of finding her Aboriginal family were renewed there.

One can only wonder at the resilience required for a person to keep their head in such conditions. In 1994 Professor Beverley Raphael a psychiatrist was shocked to find the extent of removal of Aboriginal children from their families and the legacy of frail mental health conditions that persisted into adulthood for these people. Nancy de Vries’s voice is that of the *denied*, those many thousands of Australians who as children suffered terrible fates at the hands of inspired eugenicists and the bureaucracies they developed to control the development of the poor, the coloured, the Aboriginal and other groups whose members were defined as in deficit. However, while others may become subsumed and resile from trusting their own voice and even lose the ambition to bravery and defense of themselves and others, Nancy de Vries would not be denied.

After graduation, Nancy de Vries ran the Aboriginal Medical Service at Brewarrina before returning to Sydney to work in drug and alcohol rehabilitation at *Wisteria House*. She was also invited to sit on the NSW Nurses Registration Board. After the Aboriginal organisation Link-Up helped her to find her mother, she volunteered to work on the organisation’s executive, to assist with the reuniting of other Aboriginal families.

Thus it was that Nancy de Vries became an important advocate for removed Aboriginal children. Nancy’s story is one of great resilience, persistence and ingenuity. She comes

across as a powerful intellectual. She is the driving force behind this book, moved by a sense of urgency to have it completed so her story would be heard. Her fellow authors are interlocutors not editors: she was the architect of the shape that it took and what it would reveal. And, as interlocutors, their own responses to Nancy add another valuable dimension.

There are many things about this book that make it special. Firstly, it documents a life at the end of a life; it was put down in Nancy de Vries's lifetime. It has an urgent quality: she wanted it completed before her life, shortened by illness, came to an end. It is an exhibition of her life, warts and all, and it documents her response to the Stolen Generations phenomena as it occurred in NSW. Importantly it documents her profound concern for the future of her family. A concern I came to share in recognition that the impact of child removal does not stop with that child but continues through succeeding generations.

Nancy de Vries is nothing if not honest. The extraordinary painful scenario of not being accepted back by her mother after she found her as an adult is harrowing. Her deep disappointment is palpable. She was 55 when finally reunited with Ruby Edwards. Mother and daughter spent only 10 hours together over a series of visits before Ruby died. De Vries described in 2002 her feelings about those few hours: "I beat the system. It may have been 10 hours in a lifetime but it was 10 hours they never wanted me to have with her".

Nancy de Vries documents her own struggle with parenting, having been robbed of the opportunity to develop those intangible skills that come from being *parented* yourself. She may also be her own worst critic and, from her acute sense of awareness of loss, perhaps her expectations of herself were too high. From all reports she was a loving and engaged mother and grandmother. However, her children have suffered extreme life events that she explained in terms of intergenerational trauma and embodied history. One thing is clear to me from my reading of her life—that is, that there were more things happening in her own family dynamics than she could possibly have had control over.

This book also provides a remarkable historical context to the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and the need for an Apology from the state, the organisation responsible for these crimes against humanity.

It provides an exploration of how other people can grant recognition and facilitate healing for both those able to speak, and for those who are only comfortable with silence. Nancy's interlocutors speak of what it means to be a witness, an addressable other, who can affirm and recognise the immediacy and the truth of the experience of the person who has been the victim of state-sanctioned crimes. This is the significant contribution brought to this collaboration by Dr Anna Nettheim who had been challenged by her own experience of working on the accounts told to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home* (1997) investigation. These stories demanded a response that could move beyond guilt or pity.

I recommend this book as another important development to the ways in which stories of the Stolen Generations continue to contribute to ongoing ideas of the importance of particular freedoms for all people. I also commend it as a call to activism. Nancy de Vries's life as an activist is inspirational.

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