
Book Review: Robie, D. (2014). *Don't spoil my beautiful face: Media, mayhem and human rights in the Pacific*. Auckland: Little Island Press (ISBN 9781877484254)

Khairiah A Rahman
AUT University

Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face is essential reading for anyone who is interested in the history and development of media issues and journalism education in the Asia-Pacific region. This book is a sequel to two other works by David Robie, *Blood on the Banner: Nationalist Struggles in the South Pacific* (1989) and *Tu Galala: Social Change in the Pacific* (1992). It is unique in its first-person historical accounts and reflective quality, combining Robie's philosophy as a long-time journalist and media educator. The chapters shift from the present and ethically tempestuous state of journalism reporting, to a critical account of the often violent power struggles and the socio-environmental issues that have affected the Asia-Pacific people. The book closes with the challenges to media and the ethical considerations in the changing education landscape of Asia-Pacific journalism.

Divided into six parts, the themes of human rights, justice and ethics run across the sections. Part 1 starts with a symbolic revelation of Robie's ancestral connection with ethical journalism. His great-great grandfather was owner of the pioneer paper, *Caledonian Mercury*, in Scotland in the mid-1800s. Fast forward some two hundred years, and Robie recounts his work as chief sub-editor of the *Sunday Observer*, reporting on the Vietnam War and making moral choices over disturbing visuals that would expose the murder of civilians by the US army. The rest of the book reinforces this idea of responsible reporting; to bring to the fore acts of oppression, to galvanise support for a just cause and to improve the human condition. This book is about journalism's role in shaping a caring and fully functioning society and Robie's stories serve to remind us that this is not idealistic. If anything, it shows us how one man and his like-minded peers walked their talk and how journalism education can alter paradigms to include what Robie calls "conflict-sensitive journalism and inclusive journalism education."

Some remarkable features of the book include Robie's incredible experience as an investigative journalist, his detailed descriptions of historical events and his close encounters with death. In Robie's journey across Africa, the narrative ushers readers along with edge-of-seat descriptions of his adventures, peppered with warnings of risks suffered by those who had gone ahead of him. For example, we learn that the Trans-African Highway was riddled with dangerous problems, both natural and man-made, from "a spectacular bogging down of 20 heavily laden trucks in the mud of the rainforests" to the murder of four Italians travelling in their four-wheel drive. Robie was cornered by gun-wielding gendarmes in the Congo, under threat by bandits in Ethiopia, frightened by a couple of soldiers in Zaire and dubiously manhandled by a soldier in Uganda.

While the drama and suspense make for entertaining and accelerated reading, there is a deliberate sense of commitment and perseverance in the telling of the story. This is an important element of the book, not least because there are not many stories written about the Asia-Pacific from the perspective of one who values the struggle of its people. We learn that Robie's time as a foreign correspondent for the French news agency initiated an interest in how French foreign policies affected the Asia-Pacific, a region that would later become a focus in Robie's professional and academic life.

Nationalism, violent and ongoing conflicts in the struggle for independence, and environmental preservation characterise Parts 2 to 5 of the book. One significant contribution of this book to Asia-Pacific journalism is the hard look it takes at autocratic regimes, oppressive colonialists, irresponsible superpowers and the journalistic decisions that can mobilise action and improve the situation. It tells the stories of Pacific struggles that are often avoided by dominant media, giving a voice to the voiceless. We are reminded of the struggle for independence between the Kanak activists and the French in New Caledonia, resulting in human rights abuses including a massacre in Hienghene in 1984. Other atrocities in the Pacific include the assassinations of Melanesian leaders in Kanaky in the same year and the wrongful imprisonment of three Tongan activists in 1996. In fact, we learn in the Foreword by Kalafi Moala, one of the Tongan activists, that it was Robie's persistent telling of their story to his network that garnered international support which led to their release.

As political commentator, Robie highlights the plight of indigenous people against oppressive powers such as the struggles of the First Nation rights in Canada in 1989, the human rights abuse over the Bukidnon forestry project in Mindanao, the Philippines, in 1989 and the Hagahai (Papua New Guinea) tribesmen 'biopiracy' affair in 1995. In his role as investigative journalist, Robie champions the rights of victims and refugees of forgotten wars and environmental disasters. He documents stories from across the Asia-Pacific, covering the internal refugees of Buenavista village in the Philippines in 1991, the massacre of peaceful demonstrators in Timor-Leste by Indonesian troops in 1992 and the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior boat by French agents in the same year. Symbolically, the cover and title of *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face* is inspired by a sign held at a rally in 1983 against French nuclear testing in the Pacific. With its extensive and exclusive coverage of such regional news, this book is a valuable asset to Asia-Pacific media literature.

For journalism educators, Part 6 is especially relevant for its model of journalism that recognises other than western news values or what Robie calls "The Four Worlds news values matrix". He acknowledges a "fifth estate" or "the indigenous tradition" in the Pacific culture and endorses journalism that is both inclusive and sensitive. As a strong advocate for ethical conflict reporting, Robie supports a deliberative model of journalism such as peace and development journalism. Unlike war journalism that promotes one perspective, peace journalism looks at all sides, while development journalism answers the "how, why?" and "what now?", looking to improve conditions in a developing nation. *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face* provides a rare look into the events of the region and is testament to Robie's enduring role as a champion of human rights and political commentator in the Asia-Pacific.

Robie, D. (1989). *Blood on their banner: Nationalist struggles in the south Pacific*. London: Zed Books; Sydney: Pluto Press.

Robie, D. (1992). *Tu Galala: Social change in the Pacific*. Wellington, NZ: Bridget Williams Books; Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press Australia.