



‘The Mountain’ by Drusilla Modjeska – essential reading for PNG enthusiasts

By Tess Newton Cain

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At the end of May, I went to Port Moresby on a work trip for a few days. It was my second visit but the first time I had been since 2006, so it was very exciting. With a sense of self-congratulation I chose [‘The Mountain’](#) as my plane reading. (The book is set in PNG, more on that later). It’s not a little book, at 448 pages. I was expecting good things based on recommendations from a number of people, including [this review](#) from a former colleague. I opened it as we took off from Brisbane, was more than half way through it on touchdown at Port Jackson and finished it on the return trip four days later. And now, with the zeal of a convert to a new religion, I am exhorting anyone and everyone with whom I come into contact to read it!

The novel opens with the arrival of Dutch photographer Rike in Port Moresby. She has accompanied her husband Leonard, an English ethnographer who is visiting the newly established Department of Anthology at the University of Papua New Guinea. The year is 1968, PNG is still under Australian administration and UPNG is still under construction. This sets the scene for the first part of the book, which spans the lead up to independence in 1975 and continues for the next few years after that. It explores a range of inter-personal,

inter-generational and inter-cultural relationships, against a background of huge political change. The author employs a range of lenses including photography, drama, debate and poetry, articulated through several of the characters as they navigate the transition to self-government with everything it entails. The mountain of the title exercises a gravity-like pull for several of the characters with life-changing impact, as the fjords and highlands do for others, providing an insight into the geographical and cultural diversity of the country.

The second half of the book is set in the period 2005-06 and follows the character of Jericho as he returns to PNG. It is the land of his birth but somewhere he has spent very little time. He travels from Port Moresby to 'the mountain' and the fjords, rebuilding relationships, learning about his birthplace and himself, and filling in the gaps in his knowledge of his own history and that of his country. Whilst much has changed in the intervening 30 years, many of the essentials of life in PNG remain.

The tenor, pace and atmosphere of the book are undeniably authentic. On my return to Port Vila, I hosted my book club and our book was 'The Mountain' (more self congratulation). Several of the members have lived in or visited PNG and all agreed that the realism was undeniable, with particular reference to the relentless drumming of the sing-sings and the intriguing beauty of the bark cloth paintings, which figure prominently in the story.

I found the political dimension of the novel intriguing and enlightening. It made it very clear to me that the issues that are central to the opportunities and challenges of today's PNG are ones that have been present for a very long time. From before independence, the people of PNG were dealing with resource extraction and associated pressures around land; how to extend development beyond urban areas; tensions between cultural integrity and the impact of modernity; balancing a burgeoning national identity with inherent and indelible tribalism; foreign exploitation as abetted by sharp national political actors – it's all there in resonant detail. Even the relationship with Australia is examined, and this was one aspect that I found particularly instructive. The Whitlam government that came to power in 1973 was determined to make Australia a *former* coloniser and, given the shortness of the Australian political cycle, this was a key factor in determining the date on which PNG became independent. The impact of political imperatives on policy-making, whether to good or bad effect, is another area of commonality between Waigani and Canberra.

Who should read this book? If it were up to me it would pretty much be essential reading. It should particularly be required reading for Australian journalists who are unable to write about PNG without mentioning cannibals, witchcraft or violence. This book makes the challenges that PNG faces clear but also does a great job of portraying the complexity, vibrancy and depth of the country and her people in a credible and appropriate way. If you

need to know more about PNG, you should read this book next time you are on a plane, if not sooner.

Tess Newton Cain (@CainTess) is a Nonresident Fellow of the Lowy Institute for International Policy and Research Associate at the Development Policy Centre.

About the author/s

Tess Newton Cain

Tess Newton Cain is the Project Lead for the [Pacific Hub](#) at the [Griffith Asia Institute](#) and is an associate of the Development Policy Centre.

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