Robie’s ‘Pacific brand’ of Journalism

by EDWARD TAVANANUANU

I

n his latest book, Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific, journalism professor David Robie imparts almost 40 years of first-hand experience and expertise as a journalist and journalism educator in the region.

“This book is a continuation of where I [Robie] left off two decades ago with Tu Galala”, he states; bringing to a close his first chapter Out of Africa.

“But unlike many accounts of the challenges of the Pacific – from the viewpoint of bureaucrats representing power elites of disinterested academies – this is an ongoing narration with other ‘voices’ of the Pacific: they are frequently the activists, campaigners and writers who have been in the vanguard of social and political change in the Pacific.”

Robie obviously takes an autobiographical, story-telling approach, exemplified through inserted excerpts of his reportage.

The first-hand experience that Robie relates quite eloquently is an inspiration for any budding or working journalist. He has covered: (anti)nuclear testing in Moruroa, French Polynesia in 1979; Bougainville Revolutionary Army (known as Rambo) guerilla in Papua New Guinea in 1989; the racial tensions behind the Rambos) guerilla in Papua New Guinea in 1990; the 1994 coup in Fiji; the 1995 Port Vila riots in Vanuatu; and the looting and arson in Nuku’alofa, Tonga, in 1999; the 1997 election crisis in Fiji; the 1998 coup in Fiji; and much of which eludes many of our younger generations. As Pacific Islanders it is absolutely essential that we know not only our own historical back grounds, but also that of our neighbours.

His articles offer a sense of refreshing nostalgia. And in that respect, Robie does us the courtesy of recalling important moments in our respective Pacific histories, some of which continue today. This, without a doubt, the most significant lesson to be learnt from his book.

Much has happened in and to the Pacific in the last four decades, much of which has faded, or been forgotten by its peoples, and much of which eludes many of our younger generations. As Pacific Islanders it is absolutely essential that we know not only our own historical backgrounds, but also that of our neighbours.

It is in-depth and first-hand reporting like what Robie shares through his articles in the book which is lacking, extinct, or momentarily on hiatus in many news-rooms across the Pacific. Although at times, it is as if Robie fails to make mention, quite explicitly, that social constructs and processes such as decolonization, democracy and media freedom are still in their infancy in many Pacific Island countries. It was only in 1962 that Western Samoa (which has since removed ‘Western’) became the first Pacific Island nation to gain political independence. And just last year, Fiji held its first ‘truly democratic’ elections. However, this understanding should not be interpreted as a validation for what has happened or continues to happen today, rather a consideration of the complexities surrounding some of the events and issues Robie discusses.

Robie addresses some obstacles faced by some Fijian journalists under the implementation of the Public Emergency Regulations in 2009 (lifted in 2012), and standing 2010 Media Decree. He also highlights the clamp down of media freedom in Tonga, in 1996, with the jailing of Tongan journalists Filokalafi ‘Akau’ola and Kalafi Moala, and the publisher ‘Akilisi Pohiva for alleged contempt of Parliament.

This includes how Robie through Pacific Media Watch aided in their release – which is reaffirmed with some validation by Kalafi Moala in the book’s foreword.

“I have watched David evolve as one of the Pacific region’s most respected journalists and journalism educators par excellence,” he writes.

“I don’t know of anyone more committed to developing quality journalism in the Pacific and especially in developing a special ‘Pacific brand’ of journalism with an in-depth understanding of the issues – including understanding of the geopolitics of the various cultures.”

However, some may question Robie’s attempts to meet these expectations by constantly drawing comparisons to Australia, New Zealand, and for obvious reasons. Robie makes mention of the complex notion of a ‘fifth estate’ (i.e. tradition and culture) in its relation to good governance and media freedom; focusing on how this has (and still) conflicts with reporting in Fiji.

Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific warrants the continued support and development of publications on Pacific journalism by and for Pacific journalists.

Novice is slam poetry champ

by ILUSAPECI TINANISIGABALAVU

SPOKEN word artist Andrea Narayan’s poetry is crafted to motivate others to care more about the real issues that affect society. Narayan, who won last month’s poetry slam at USP, considers herself a novice to performance poetry. She said last month’s performance was her second.

Her first performance was last November at another poetry slam, which she also won. The bass guitarist said she had always wanted to engage in performance that did not require her to play a musical instrument.

Hence, when the poetry slam invitation was circulated last year, she grabbed the opportunity.

Narayan said she had always scribbled poetry as a member of a band. It was the performance aspect that troubled her.

“I am very new to it still,” she insisted. She said the experience so far had allowed her to improve her writing.

“I usually just write a bunch of poems and when the occasion comes, I express my work,” she said. “From this year’s poetry slam, I aimed to achieve self-expression and get people to be more aware about things around them; to wake up and see that you don’t have to follow everybody, you can just do your own thing and be okay.”

Narayan’s poetry touches on issues like ISIS and poverty, which she feels many of her peers are not interested in because they’re more into celebrity news.

She hopes that by putting it out there in her poetry, she can create intrigue and help her peers gain a better understanding of the issues that matter.

USP’s School of Language, Arts and Media will hold the next poetry slam contest at the end of next semester.