

# The dilemmas of knowing too much: writing *In the desert* – Jimmy Pike as a boy<sup>1</sup>

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I wrote the first draft of a manuscript about the artist Jimmy Pike's childhood in the late 1980s. For various reasons, the manuscript was never published during Jimmy's lifetime, and sat for a long time in my files.

A few years ago my editors at Penguin wanted to know if I had any manuscripts in preparation. I mentioned the draft biography, which they were keen to have a look at. I sent it away and they offered to publish it. We agreed that the manuscript needed more work.

It was many years since I had looked at the draft, and I did some rewriting including, at my editor's request, a number of flash-forwards to my own time in the desert with Jimmy. I had some notes of conversations and recordings in Jimmy's own words, but I also remembered many stories he had told me casually in the course of our 16 years together. Naturally, I drew on them as well.

As I worked through the manuscript again, mining my notebooks and memory, I occasionally had misgivings. Some of the stories were highly personal in nature: how would Jimmy have felt about my putting them in? I knew that he had quite a different attitude to privacy from me. Early on in our relationship, a film crew came out to our camp to interview him. I warned him that they would ask him about his years in prison. He wasn't fazed at all. Going to prison was all in a life's work to him, and he answered the anticipated questions unabashed. In later life, he often referred casually to his years in prison, and once, when we had joined a historical tour of Fremantle Prison, Jimmy took over from the official guide, pointing out features and telling anecdotes of his own. He simply didn't feel that having been to prison was something to be ashamed of.

Many times Jimmy had surprised me with his tolerant attitude to things I wanted him to be indignant about. When Elizabeth Durack was found to have offered for sale a whole exhibition of her own work under the name and persona of a fictitious Aboriginal male artist, Eddie Burrup, and entered the work in an Aboriginal art award, the art world expressed outrage. For a while, the media were full of it. People wanted to know what Jimmy felt about the imposture, but he just said: 'We can't down her, that old woman.' I read this as a reluctance to criticise someone he knew, or to take up the cudgels over something that didn't concern him. His disregard for such matters often caused me to reconsider

my own society, and to notice how we love to express opinions, especially negative ones, about what other people do. Jimmy's culture seemed much less censorious.

Closer to home, I hated mining and exploration companies encroaching on Jimmy's desert country and wanted him to feel the same. But no: mining companies put in tracks, making remote waterholes more accessible; their rubbish tips were a good source of useful building materials. So long as they didn't trash significant places, mining companies were welcome.

So, what sorts of incidents in Jimmy's childhood was I worried about?

I didn't think Jimmy would mind mention of his early sexual experiences, such as jumping onto one of his young relations and pretending to ravish her. He had recounted this incident with amusement rather than shame.

Then there was his tendency to bully his younger brother, and other boyish bad behaviour. I already knew he wouldn't mind my retelling those incidents; he had previously illustrated some of those very stories, which I had written in fictional form.<sup>2</sup>

Then there were instances of other people's bad behaviour: Jimmy once told me a story about a relation tormenting a blind man with a smouldering stick. Years later, the relation he had accused told me exactly the same story, but with Jimmy as the perpetrator. Who was telling the truth? Probably both of them, I decided: clearly, they were both present and neither intervened on the blind man's behalf.

I worried more about telling stories that could be used as fuel for prejudice by those critics who seize on any information they think reflects badly on Indigenous culture: Jimmy's mother abandoning him on an antbed, for instance; the practice of killing one of a pair of twins; the story of a child left to perish in the desert after her mother died; any number of spearings; and, finally, Jimmy's aunty who claimed to have eaten human flesh. But the writer can't allow the ill-disposed to inhibit one's writing.

Of even more concern were matters touching cultural beliefs. I wasn't worried about retelling a couple of traditional stories, because Jimmy had made these public through his paintings. However, as a child he had broken a taboo. Would he have minded me writing about that? I remembered that he told me the story in a matter-of-fact way and didn't ask me to keep it to myself, as he did with some things. He is beyond being blamed for that incident now. However, I didn't know whether his relations would like that story.

They might not have liked other stories, either. All those abductions and murders and retaliatory spearings; all that violence. I think it is more likely to be people from my culture who would find that hard to stomach; we have become very squeamish about personal violence, especially when it entails the shedding of

blood, though we have less compunction about wreaking all kinds of havoc on foreigners, preferably from the safety of the skies.

I could have gone to the family and read them the stories I wasn't sure about and asked their permission to retell them. But the very asking would have seemed to invite a refusal. I am reminded of one woman, quite closely related to Jimmy, who had contributed a lot of words and information to a dictionary of her language. She had supplied a number of words for parts of the body and its functions. However, when asked by a conscientious linguist if certain words should go into the dictionary or not, the woman said: no, they shouldn't go in. Asked then if doctors and nurses should know such words, she agreed that they should, and so the words in question went in after all. It was the linguist's selection of bodily function words as questionable that invited this woman to deem them inappropriate, probably more in deference to her notion of white people's sensibilities than her own.

If members of the family had raised objections to what I proposed to write, I would have argued my case as forcefully as I could, but in the end I would have had no option but to honour the implied contract: if one asks permission, one has to be prepared to accept the answer 'no'. In reality though, I am confident they would have respected the story as Jimmy's rather than theirs or mine, which I could never have written without his collaboration.

Then again, ever since I first went into the desert with Jimmy, I had felt privileged to be learning so much about the desert way of life, both through his teaching and incidentally, from observation and hearing casual stories. What should one do with a privilege – keep it to oneself, or share it with others? I chose to share it.

In so doing I was encouraged by how I have seen people react to collections of old photographs, such as those of Spencer and Gillen; how the younger generation of Jimmy's extended family have pored over other books I have contributed to about their parents' generation and way of life; and what Rolf De Heer said about Yolngu people's excited response to the Donald Thompson photographs that inspired his film *Ten Canoes*. I dare to think that future generations of Jimmy's people will be glad to have books such as this one, to tell them what their forebears were like and how they lived. They might have preferred them to have been written by the forebears themselves, but those people went in for oral history, not literature, and, as we know, the oral story lines have been disrupted. Besides that, people who grew up in the desert take for granted the conditions and details of daily life that so fascinate those of us who grew up in modern towns, and it takes an outsider to provide that sort of background.

So in the end I didn't consult anyone. I wrote down just about everything I could remember that Jimmy had told me about his childhood, feeling most secure when I could find a voice recording from him, or more-or-less verbatim notes I

had written at the time. Despite my occasional misgivings about one story or another, I didn't deliberately conceal anything, or dilute it to make it more acceptable, or try to explain it away. It is all there for readers to enjoy or not, and to make of what they will. I believe it is more important to document this ancient but soon-to-be forgotten way of life, and to retell the precious stories of the last people to have lived it, than it is to censor oneself for fear of what the neighbours will say.

## References

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Lowe, Pat 1992, *Yinti: Desert child*, Magabala Books, Broome.

——— 2007, *In the desert: Jimmy Pike as a boy*, Penguin Group, Camberwell, Victoria.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lowe 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See Lowe 1992.