

A DRAGON'S TALE Book Review by Annabelle Pegrum*

[Speech at book's launch, Hog's Breath Café, Woden, ACT, on 6 September 2007]

I love to read. It's somewhat of a passion for me, if an indiscriminate one. The thing is rarely a day goes by when I don't make time to snuggle up with a book. So you will understand when I say that it really was a pleasure to be asked to read *A Dragon's Tale* for this launch.

However, you should also know that I'm not into sports of any kind really and that I generally read fiction, being enticed by other worlds of 'make believe'. No surprise then that when I sat down to read a *Dragon's Tale* I did not expect to find myself a couple of hours later curled up on the couch totally engrossed in this 'true life' story which (on the face of it) was about women with breast cancer forming teams to paddle dragon boats!

The thing is that this book is about adventure, about mateship and about sheer courage (sometimes even bloody mindedness) and it's about winning - winning at a personal, emotional and group level.

At its very core the *Dragon's Tale* is about the sheer joy of living - of bounding - with a paddle - into life with all one's heart. What it is not, is a book about cancer - sure it raises your awareness about breast cancer but the disease comes last at every point in this story of friendship and success - in short the 'cancer' is a detail that you move past, and above, pretty quickly - just as the women do.

For me *Dragon's Tale* is also a book about Australians and Australia. There is the gutsy mateship part, but it's more subtle than that. I love the fact that the idea of Dragon Boat racing for women with breast cancer was born in our nation's capital nearly a decade ago when a woman from the Northern Territory (Michelle Hanton) attended the first national breast cancer conference in Canberra and saw a slide (at one of the presentations) of a dragon boat team from Canada cheekily called *Chemo Savvy*.

With true Oz spirit she opened her imagination to this idea from across the globe and started a great wave of dragon's (each powerful, independent and determined) across the waterways of Australia. Her first port of call (so to speak), had been Anna Wellings Booth in Canberra who had missed the talk because she was busy planting the now famous Field of Women - and where else would an Australian woman do that but right in front of Parliament House on Federation Mall?

But if Australians are open to ideas from other cultures so too are we great at expanding and re-inventing those ideas and reaching back out to the world. Reading on I was delighted therefore to discover that the Oz Dragon spirit completed the circle by extending out into international competition and indeed leaping into composite international teams - an idea forged by the women in Australia.

This *Dragon's Tale* 'history' is told in the book in wonderful, magical prose - at times it is almost poetic. No boring chronology here, the history is swift, swirling and eddying, as if on the Dragon's breath, tail and wings it weaves its way around the country.

Chapters start with snapshots about what makes each state unique. There is warmth and humour in the descriptions of the places and of the women and their wonderful boats – and there seems to be a quite competition for the cheesiest (I say this with real admiration) team name – from the all encompassing *Pink Ladies* to *Tickled Pink* and *Amazon Heart* to a yacht race called *Simply the Breast!*

There is also an unforgettable experience –an Aussie bush tale told in stunning detail - of a prosthesis being used to save a wombat. I won't spoil the fun by going to the punch line – you can read all about it yourselves.

But I trust you will understand when I tell you that the role of Canberra, our nation's capital in this *Dragon's Tale* entranced me the most.

You see the capital was always intended to be not only our Seat of Government but also a reflection of Australian national life. Surely this women's story that started here in Canberra at a conference and marks a chapter again with the launch of this book is a proud moment in just that, our national life. I have to say, however, that when this site for the capital was selected, I doubt that anyone really envisaged that the Lake formed on the ancient Molonglo River, would be lit up by women in pink 'fascinator' feather boas paddling for all they are worth in a Dragon Boat of many colours nearly 100 years later!

It is this sort of colour and movement that sweeps through the language of the book. Graphically it is also wonderful. The pictures of great rivers and lakes across our country, of boats and smiling women, of monks and paddles light up the pages. The whole is set against a light background on each page of yellow-ochre swirls which I swear make you think you are seeing the Dragon flash as you read about 'shimmering pink-scaled tails'.

I said at the start that this book is not about cancer. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of this is the way that it touches on the stories of some of the team mates who have died. The *Angels Abreast* are drawn as very much a living part of the team. They are written into the *Dragon's Tale* in such a way that their spirit is palpable, their courage indefatigable, and their story continuing with each stroke of the paddle.

There are many personal statements in the book that linger with you. None are clichés; all have a sense of spontaneity – some even of wonder.

I have chosen this statement by a woman called Cheryl Watson to read to you because it typifies for me what the book is about...

There was a time with this disease that I was in fear for my life, and now I am having the time of my life.

I commend a *Dragon's Tale* to you – I look forward to the next book, perhaps called '*Daughters of a Dragon's Tale*' which will celebrate the cure for breast cancer – a sequel that must surely be written.

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