

The Yuin, Bunurong and Tasmanian author, 73, has written more than 30 books including the 2014 bestseller *Dark Emu*. In 2018 he received the Australia Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature.

BODIES

You're in your 70s. What are you enjoying and resenting about the ageing process?

I'm enjoying waking up every morning. You'd be a mean-minded bugger if you had a grizzle about being alive. I've never had an Adonis-like body, so what's happening now is a general deterioration: I feel a bit slower and sorer. It's interesting thinking about bodies, because my mother was blind and deaf. She was a tough bird. I have inherited some of those genes. Not beautiful, but reliable.

Was your mother deaf and blind the entire time she raised you, or did that happen later in life?

She became deaf at 17 or 18, and blind at about 40. She was very philosophical about it. When you're around someone like that, you're very careful about what you complain about, because you're not gonna get very far.

You have fair skin. I imagine people have told you, "You don't look Aboriginal." How do you respond?

[Chuckles] Well, they're correct - I have fair skin. The amount of Aboriginal genetic material in my body hasn't made me black of skin. [But] I knew [I was Aboriginal] because my uncle told me when I was about nine. At 17, I was working for my uncle casually in the summer holidays, and he introduced me to a lot of family. Around 30, my daughter asked me about photographs in the album I'd never questioned: "Who's this person? Why do they look like that?" Who were they and what did they look like?

Well, my great-grandfather was a dark-skinned man.

And there was an auntie in there, also dark skinned.

She was there every Christmas. When I started to investigate the family, my dad just nodded and said, "There's more to know." The story was leaping out at me. And if you start on an exploration of your family, and you're not moved by it, then I don't understand your soul. Of course, I'm more **Cornish** than Koori. But my cultural and spiritual life is all here in Australia.

SEX

You would have come of age in the late '60s and early '70s. To what extent were you a beneficiary of the sexual revolution?

Not at all. I've got an ordinary body and a head like a twisted sandshoe. So I wasn't the favoured male prize at all. For me, the sexual revolution came very slowly.

The fuse burnt long and slow.

If you could go back in time and give a younger version of yourself a pep talk, what would you tell that younger self about romance, sex, beauty and women?

Wait.

Why do you say that?

Because it hasn't done me any harm. Not being a popular male to women didn't hurt me at all. It gave me the opportunity to watch and care, and to look for people who had a good heart. I had this opportunity to watch, think and wonder. And sex was all about wonder. It still is.

When you say, "It still is", a lot of people, probably unfairly, don't associate people in their 70s with sexuality. Do you care to correct the record?

[Chuckles] I could relieve them of their ignorance. Sex is still an enormous compulsion. I find women beautiful.

The opportunities available for 70-year-old men are much overstated. But I'm certainly aware.

RELIGION

Did you grow up with religion?

My parents met in the Baptist Church, so we were surrounded by Christianity. But increasingly, I became a sceptic. My mother would say, "Well, what it's about, Bruce, is goodness and fairness."

But what I saw were church people leaving their shops – where they were screwing people for every dollar – and going to church and being sanctified. It was a fraud. When I told my mum, she thought about it and said, "It's possible for people in church to be good."

I said, "Yeah, Mum, but they could be better." Then she said, "And Bruce, so could you." [Laughs] As you discovered more about your Aboriginal heritage, did that discovery manifest as a new spiritual outlook?

I was always in awe of Aboriginal spirituality. But I had resigned myself to never being part of it.

Why?

What we talked about before. "Not black enough; not Aboriginal enough." But in the course of working on Convincing Ground and Dark Emu, I got close to a group of people on the NSW South Coast, and I was in awe of the fact that they could dance and sing their language and their lore. I

accepted I would never be able to do that. Then I got a phone call one day, and one of the brothers said, "We want you to come up and talk to our young men." I thought, "They just want me to talk about Dark Emu." So I turned up at this place with the clothes I was standing in. And he said, "You're here for 11 days."

When he said that, what went through your mind?

Hygiene. I didn't have a toothbrush. I had to look in the back of the car to make sure my swag was there. I had no clothes. But we camped on a river and I was able to wash my clothes and myself. On the third day, that old man was teaching us the songs and dances, the philosophy he had received from the son of the only survivor of a massacre. I was in awe and trepidation because I didn't want to make a mistake. I didn't want to do anything that was impertinent. It was all about love of the earth. I was so moved by it. It changed my life.

What's the meaning of life?

Goodness and fairness – my mum was right. ✉ diceytopics@goodweekend.com.au **Bruce Pascoe's** new book, *Loving Country: A Guide to Sacred Australia* (Explore Australia, \$45), with photographer Vicky Shukuroglou, is out now.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Benjamin Law, 'Bruce Pascoe', *Sydney Morning Herald, The* (online), 12 Dec 2020 46 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AUNB&docref=news/17F4E51C056149F0>>

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