



SHARP BITE, STILL HEALING

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Snake Dancing By Roberta Sykes, Allen & Unwin, 268pp, \$22.95

. Roberta Sykes unfolds more eloquent testimony of white prejudice

. LIVING alone in Sydney's Kings Cross in the 1960s, writer and activist Roberta Sykes found her pet python to be a single girl's best protection against rapists and unwanted suitors. "I was asked to leave quite a few apartment buildings because of men screaming on the way out," she writes in *Snake Dancing*, the second volume of her autobiography, *Snake Dreaming: Autobiography of a Black Woman*. This downbeat, laconic humour is what readers of the awardwinning *Snake Cradle* expect. Perfectly timed comic lines are what make reading about the pain of much of Sykes's life bearable; no matter how sad the eyes behind the wry smile.

Her fear of rapists was no fantasy. At the age of 17 -a year before *Snake Dancing* opens -she was gang-raped in Brisbane by 20 young white men. Only four were later brought to justice, thanks to the perseverance of a single detective.

The hearing took a year. Sykes travelled south from her home town of Townsville, her newborn baby in her arms, to attend.

At their request, a white couple, father and mother of one of the defendants, saw their grandchild. When the man who had kicked her unconscious was sentenced to 14 years, Sykes, standing outside the court, heard him shout. His words, printed on one of *Snake Cradle*'s closing pages were: " `What the hell! She's an Abo! She's just a f. . . . boong! " "

There is an image from the early 70s *Snake Dancing* deals with this time that stays in my mind. It was before the Aboriginal Tent Embassy of 1972 went up on the Parliament House lawn, making Sykes a media star as the embassy's first secretary. Bobbi (as we knew her in those, her pre-Harvard doctorate, days) sits -a skinny, slight figure, Afro of chic Angela Davis proportions -hunched next to Aboriginal activist Gary Foley

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There are fewer journalists than the fingers of one hand. Not a press photographer or cameraman in sight. (The Australian public -the editors had decided -were fed up with pictures of Aborigines.) Sitting there, Sykes smouldered. Her fingers drummed on the table.

One foot jiggled up and down as our group of junior reporters nervously asked questions.

Life taught Sykes all there is to know about how coloured people are seen by most of the white community and she knows just how to deliver her story -so urgently in need of telling -to a white readership. The temptation to go into too much detail about the infighting of the turbulent black politics of the book's last half she cleverly avoids. A pro, she serves up tasty morsels about campaign trail followers such as: Germaine Greer, Mike Willesee and (goodness me!) Lord Vestey.

She is reassuringly domestic. Yes, even black activists eat takeaway pizza and wait all day for repairmen to show. Along the way she provides her readers with powerful images from her experience which drove her to throw her lot in with the Aboriginal cause.

Sykes at 18 counted rape, a baby, an attempted suicide, a miscarriage and a failed marriage as part of her experience.

Prepared only for domestic work by her convent school and finding herself penniless in Sydney, she turned to the great love of her innocence: dancing. She danced in the clubs with snakes -her Aboriginal totem as part of her act. The word "nigger" was scrawled on her makeup mirror in one of the clubs. When she refused to attend one of criminal Abe Saffron's parties, she was blacklisted.

Her hunt for means to support herself and her two children (she has a daughter by a second marriage) is eloquent testimony to white prejudice. "Not many coloured women get the chances you've had, I can tell you," her mother tells her, after her daughter starts washing beersoaked sheets for a Townsville hotel. In Sydney, she dons an elegant tropical outfit for work as a waitress in the American Club: "We were, I suppose, hired to be decorative, servile, quietly attentive and non-threatening," she observes. Ringing up to apply for a job in a Townsville bar, Sykes asks: "Do you hire coloured people?" Experience had taught her not to waste time applying for jobs in person until she had the answer.

She did not know who her father was.

Her mother, who battled poverty and prejudice to raise three daughters in 50s Queensland, constantly reinvented him: first as a Fijian, then a Papua New Guinean and, finally, an American soldier who was half-Negro and half-Cherokee Indian. In her case, ethnicity was incidental. In a country such as Australia, the colour of her skin was enough. "I recall in those days people would frequently ask me why I was an activist," she writes. "They didn't understand when I told them we just wanted to be treated decently."

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