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## Reviews

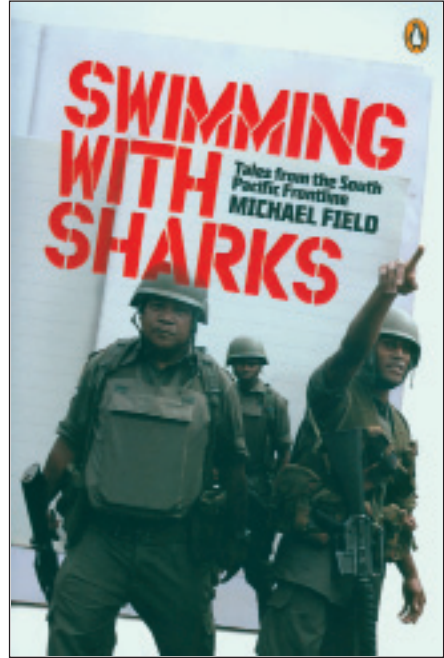
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### Action-packed travel? Yes. But analysis? Forget it.

***Swimming with Sharks: Tales from the South Pacific Frontline***,  
by Michael Field. Rosedale, New Zealand:  
Penguin Books, 2010, 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-  
14-320373-5

IN JOURNALISM, combining investigative reporting with autobiography at a substantial level of proficiency can be extremely difficult. Along with intelligence, tenacity and a highly developed ‘nose for news’, the ability to recognise your own relative unimportance in almost every situation being reported upon is critical. Unfortunately this collection of stories inverts what should be every journalist’s priorities. What might have been an informative account of events in the South Pacific over the last few decades instead



becomes a disappointing, disjointed list of the experiences of one well-travelled storyteller.

From the first page to the last, Field insists on making his experiences and views THE STORY. Even the subtitle suggests a flair for overdramatisation: the cover-photo of three armed soldiers clearly chosen to reinforce the image of a menacing region where bravery is the first requirement of any journalist committed to ‘tales from the South Pacific Frontline’. More later on the comparative tameness of criminality and militarism in the South Pacific but for now, think David Bradbury’s

*Frontline* and the photojournalism of Neil Davis.

The book commences with a Prologue, subtitled 'roaming around', derived from the name an anonymous Fijian woman gave to sharks which are claimed to frequent the Rewa River. Field appropriates the name to warn of the universal need to watch out for 'roaming-around sharks'. For Field, the warning is especially applicable for the South Pacific 'sea of states that ban me' (p. 9). Fiji, in particular, is a 'paradise for sharks' (p. 175).

There are actually just four countries—Fiji, Tonga, Kiribati, and Nauru—which have at various times banned Field from entering and the opening hyperbole is instructive for much that follows. The book has 12 chapters, from the first 'Never was paradise' to the last, somewhat contradictorily titled 'Paradise whatever'. Given the over-use of the expression 'paradise' in various descriptions of South Pacific countries and settings, the author can not be condemned for excessive originality.

The first chapter begins with Field's introduction to journalism as an NZ Volunteer Service Abroad person—writing 'how to' guides for Botswana's Ministry of Agriculture—and then working on the Samoan Prime Minister's staff. In

the early 1970s, well before Derek Freeman's academic demolition of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, 'it dawned on [Field] that Mead was wrong' about 'free love' (p. 15) in that country. The chapter also sets the tone for much that follows. Personal anecdotes intermingle with commentary, clichés ('Invariably, Fiji was different' [p. 18]), innuendo, and assertions. Clearly Field has a vast armoury of wink-wink, nudge-nudge stories, collected over many years.

There are subsequent chapters, on Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Nauru, Bougainville, and Solomon Islands, as well as on Disasters and Forum meetings. Partly because of very poor editing, so that multi-sentence paragraphs and oneliners appear with no clear logic for the differing formats, each chapter is more a collection of points than a coherent description or developed argument, jumping backwards and forwards without a clear chronology.

Take the introductory page and a half of Field's background description of the late 1980s-early 1990s revolt on Bougainville. It begins with a facile throw-away line: 'Francis Ona was king of an imaginary country when he died'. Over the next page and a half, of juxtaposed three, two and one sentence paragraphs, the origins

and process of the conflict become no more than a set of clichés. BCL (Bougainville Copper Ltd) polluted ‘a wide area down to the coast’, Ona ‘worked for BCL as a surveyor and found himself party to the destruction of his neighbourhood’, so ‘demanded AUSS\$10 billion in compensation’ (p. 138). When Rio Tinto/BCL did not pay up, ‘Ona created the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA)’ (p. 138). And? Field says no more, assuming that all readers will know the rest or at least be sympathetic to the version he sketches.

Yet there is much, much more, available in published form as well as by the simple process of making phone calls. To take just one instance: it was never at all clear that the destruction of the countryside, which had been going on for some years prior to 1988, played much part in the original outbreak of the revolt, or that BCL was the main target of Ona and the BRA. The plundering of the Road Mine Tailings Leases Trust Fund (RMTLTF) by other Bougainvillians was at least as significant, and has been well-documented.<sup>1</sup>

In short, for the introduction to an account published in 2010, Field reproduces a facile short-hand version of ‘the causes’ of the revolt, without checking to see if scholarship subsequent to his 1990s’ visit to the area

had produced a more detailed and nuanced version of events which he witnessed and later chose to describe.

The lesson here for all journalists, academics and others is to ascertain diligently what is already available in a published form before writing up a story, article or book. Checking should always be done beforehand and then again afterwards, especially if trying to write up an account years later from notes taken at the time.

Fiji appears in much of the book, and provides an especially suitable lens with which to examine the Fieldian view of the region. The country’s importance applies particularly to the shark-infested, conflict and corruption-ridden image of the South Pacific that the author seeks to portray, and which has to be exposed by intrepid investigative journalism.

A major deficiency of this portrayal is that by international standards, neither the South Pacific as a whole nor any country within it is especially exceptional. Rather than being ‘a frontline’, almost all that happens in the region’s small countries with relatively few people occurs after it has occurred elsewhere. Money laundering, primary accumulation by a capitalist class-in-formation, chonyism, rigged elections, even in the case of one country, overt military rule: Zaire, Indonesia, Pakistan,

Russia and a host of other countries have been the substantial frontiers for these processes with the South Pacific trailing along behind.

Numerous people, including the most constant critics of military rule in Fiji, have pointed out that this country is not Burma or any other place where opponents of the regime are killed, tortured, dropped from helicopters, or made to disappear.

As for Field's account of Fiji and the current regime, it is remarkably like the 'official' version propagated by the Australian and New Zealand governments, with just enough radicalism to suggest Field is not a government 'tool'. PM Bainimarama is cruel, scheming, paranoid, power-hungry and vengeful: ex-NZ PM Helen Clark's description of the military commander as 'mad' lurks just beneath the surface of the journalist's assessment. Even though Bainimarama told Field that he had given former PM Laisenia Qarase two weeks to scrap proposed legislation that was clearly provocative, even racist and discriminatory, it was clear to the author that 'conceding ground on that was never going to be enough' (p. 214).

Why then give two weeks? How did Field know what the commander of the Fiji military intended to do? Silence reigns.

Field further takes up the official ANZ government line on why Bainimarama staged what he terms the 'fourth coup' in 2006. It was to save his own neck: the commander's role in the murder of soldiers and others during the aftermath of the November 2000 mutiny at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks was close to being revealed and form the basis of a prosecution (p. 202).

Much of the remainder of the Fiji sections focuses on those who have supported the military takeover: unsurprisingly, these are condemned.

The possibility that many who have decided to work with the regime are not just opportunists does not appear to have crossed Field's mind, for after all the South Pacific is full of 'roaming-around sharks'. Instead, they are complicit in all that has occurred, including the killing of mutineers and the Counter Revolutionary Warfare soldiers who provided the muscle behind the May 2000 takeover of Parliament.

The lack of comparative consideration of just what has happened in Fiji or the rest of the South Pacific is stunning. For the country where militarism is most prominent, one might expect the roll call of deceased and injured to run into scores, or even hundreds. While a complete list of those so affected in the aftermath

of the mutiny is hard to come by, the death toll in the entire periods of military rule, from 1987 onwards seems likely to be less than 20.

From May 2000 and for two months, many MPs were held in captivity, chaos reigned in the Parliament buildings and across the country. And the death toll? Climbed? No—even though soldiers against the takeover strained at the leash, demanding that they be allowed to go in and rescue the hostages, discipline was maintained and fewer than five people died. The much-maligned RFMF conducted a copybook exercise in how to deal with a hostage situation.

Since the events of late 2000, however it has been done, by sidelining dissident officers or encouraging them to emigrate, the senior ranks of the RFMF have remained solidly behind the government. Would Field prefer an outbreak of civil war, with soldier pitted against soldier, and the events of the mutiny replayed on a broader, longer canvas? For this is what a comparative lens would show: for all the offensiveness of the takeover in Fiji, so far—and no thanks to those in official and other circles who have urged soldiers to break ranks with the commander and his supporters—the military have not provided an instance of civil war which would make Fiji like other ‘frontline’ states.

For anyone who wants an incident packed read, with just enough anecdotes, action-packed events provided and described by a journalist who likes to place himself at the centre of the action, *Swimming with Sharks* is an interesting book. But don’t look for detailed, documented analysis: expect and receive a light-weight account of what has sometimes occurred in some places over the last few decades.

Buy this as you would a travel magazine in paperback form.

#### Note

1. See for explanations published years apart, Tanis, J. (2005). Nagovisi villages as a window on Bougainville in 1988, in Regan, A. J., and Griffin, H. M. (Eds.), *Bougainville Before the Conflict* (pp. 462-463). Canberra: Pandanus Books; Thompson, H.M., and MacWilliam, S. (1992). *The Political Economy of Papua New Guinea*, especially chapters 1 and 3. Manila and Wollongong: Journal of Contemporary Asia Press.