

Words of Silence

VINCENT BALL

OTHER BOOKS BY VINCENT BALL

Buck Jones, Where are You? (autobiography)

The Cathedral Tree

Patrick Downs

Regency Rebel

Writer's Block

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vincent Ball OAM was born in Wee Waa, New South Wales. His dream of becoming *a cowboy on the fillums* took him on an adventure that included serving with the RAAF in England in World War II, working his way back to England on a tramp steamer, and winning a scholarship to The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, London.

He worked as an actor for 25 years (waiting to be discovered and whisked off to Hollywood!), and returned to Australia in 1973.

Vincent is a widower. He has four children, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

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Vincent Ball, March 2018

For Diana Beevers.
A very special lady

Chapter 1

The two men could be in their late twenties. It was hard to tell as their skin had the leathery brownness that told its tale of a life in the Australian outback. They sat their horses in a relaxed, easy way, eyes screwed up against the dust raised by the cattle and the glare of the hot midday sun. At first glance they were typical stockmen, their lean frames clothed in chequered shirts, off-white trousers, elastic-sided boots and topped with a wide-brimmed hat.

They watched the herd being expertly funnelled into the holding pens by the aborigine stockmen. The nervous bawling of the cattle intermingled with the rider's whistles and the sharp crack of their stockwhips created a cacophony of noise that was typical of cattle yards in country towns all over Australia.

Jack Evans, owner of Waaree cattle station – 500 square miles of unfriendly pasture that somehow sustained his large herd of cattle – sadly surveyed the noisy dusty scene around him.

“Looks like this'll be the last time we'll be mustering on horseback Reg. But, if we're gunna compete, we'll have to be like the rest of 'em and hire helicopters and get ourselves

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some 'Yamaha' motor bikes." He patted the neck of his stockhorse."It's not going to be the same is it? Part of the romance of working a cattle station is the stockhorse. I dunno about you but I'm going to miss all that."

Reg Brady, Jack's friend and foreman, didn't answer for a moment as he was thinking about riding 'Yamaha' motor bikes and wondering if they'd be able to do the same job as a horse.

But as Jack turned towards him, Reg's hands and fingers began to flutter like butterflies in reply as he mouthed silent words and signed a homemade language that only Jack could understand.

"Yeah I couldn't agree with you more. I'm going to miss the saddling up of a morning with the other men. The Australian stockhorse has sort of, become part of the family haven't they?" Reg laughed a soundless laugh, his white teeth a slash in his brown face and signed, *"What am I saying, 'part of the family', it must be the heat."*

Jack shared the laugh."Yeah I know what you mean."

They continued to watch the busy scene in companionable silence, their thoughts on the future with motor bikes and helicopters.

Jack slowly shook his head and more to himself murmured,

"Yeah, it's never going to be the same again."

He turned to Reg.

"They've just about finished. I'll go and pay the men and see you back at the hotel."

Reg nodded, wheeled his horse and moved towards the town's centre.

Jack trotted over to the holding pens where his seven Aboriginal stockmen had gathered.

Peter, the head stockman spoke.

“Boss, all in now, pretty good shape. Me and men camp down by river same place last time.

“All right Peter. I’ll bring some money and some beer, only no trouble now.”

Peter gave him a wide grin, saying,

“No trouble boss, no trouble.”

“Okay,” and raising his arm to the others, Jack moved away.

* * *

The pub was crowded and Jack and Reg, freshly showered and clothed, managed to shoulder their way to the bar that ran the length of the room. After eventually getting the attention of the harassed barmen they then had to shoulder their way back through the crowd without losing too much of their beer.

“Bloody hell, it’s hardly worth it, where did all these blokes come from?”

Reg handed his beer to Jack and signed,

“Looks like there’s a couple of shearing gangs here” – indicating a large group of men doing a good job of noisily drinking their way through their last pay cheque. “And if I’m not mistaken they’re getting to the stage of being belligerent loud mouthed drunks.”

His hand movements caught the eye a couple of the shearers, who in their drunken state were fascinated by the unusual activity of Reg’s hands.

“Aye sport, “one of them yelled out, “what are yer wavin’ yer hands around like a great big sheila for. You a poof or somethin?”

When Reg didn’t reply, this somewhat angered the noisy

drunk who was being egged on by his mates.

“Aye I’m talkin’ to you.”

“Ignore him,” Jack said, handing Reg his beer, “he’s only looking for a fight.”

Reg turned his back and did as Jack said.

That was like a red rag to a bull. The drunk was up on his feet and shouldering his way towards Reg and Jack.

Jack watched his progress saying quietly.

“Oh shit, he’s on his way over, looks like trouble.”

Reg casually moved towards the bar, left his beer there and turned to face the oncoming troublemaker.

Jack, as peacemaker, stepped forward in the path of the would-be assailant.

“My friend is mute. It’s a sign language. It is the only way he can speak.”

Hoping that the drunk would understand and maybe this would calm him down.

The drunken shearer stared at Reg for some time.

“He’s a dummy, is that what yer sayin?”

“He is dumb ...” but Jack was interrupted by,

“He’s a dummy!” The drunk turned to his mates calling out, “Hey, we’ve got a dummy here fellas!”

Reg, who had quietly been watching this interplay eased his way forward to stand directly in front of the shearer’s face. He made a few small signals with his hands.

The now bemused drunk looked at Jack and shook his head as he slurringly said, “what did he say?”

Jack resignedly rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

“He said why don’t you piss off.”

Well that did it. The drunk took a swing at Reg, who easily avoided it and stepped in with a short right to the jaw and the drunk landed on back and stayed there. It was on then for young and old.

Jack and Reg could obviously take care of themselves. They'd been doing it for the past ten years in the bush pubs of Queensland. Eventually everybody was involved, most of them not really knowing what it was all about – some even trying to ignore it.

Shouts of “Get the Police” didn't have any effect and it was only when shouts of “The police are coming!” that the fighting stopped. Chairs were quickly picked up and tables righted as if it was a sort of regular routine.

A lone rather nervous looking policeman entered.

“What's going on here?”

Someone said “Nothing” – except that there was spilt beer all over the place, shirts were torn, there were bloody noses, busted lips and a tooth was lying on the bar ...

The barman called out,

“Have a drink Bill.”

A schooner was passed quickly along to the policeman. He sipped his beer, while looking around at the groups of men quietly chatting as if it was a church tea party, his face registering the unreality of it all.

*

The town had quietened down. The dormitory style accommodation for the shearers were now full of snoring men sleeping off their boozing, before heading to the next shearing station at daybreak. A few lone stragglers, like me, wended their way home along the dimly lit street and in the distance the bawling and movement of the penned-up cattle could be heard waiting for the auction the following day.

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In the blackness of room No 5 in the Coolabah Hotel, I could hear from down the hall a murmur of voices – male and female – the squeaking of a bed – giggles.

But in here there was only me and a gut full of beer for company. Being mute made it too difficult to get a girl – to ‘chat one up’ in a noisy pub? Yeah right.

I was born unable to talk and my mum kept telling me when I was a kid that it was all right to be dumb and that it didn't really matter. I couldn't talk and it didn't really matter! That was my mum for you!

Thank God for Helen Evans the wife of George Evans the owner of Waaree. She'd been a schoolteacher before she married George and to occupy herself, while her husband was with the cattle, she gathered together all the aborigine children around the station, cleaned out and decorated a small empty building and started teaching them how to read and write. My mum used to help her until I came along and Jack arrived a couple of months later.

But me being born mute didn't help my parents – I can still hear my mum and dad, fighting and shouting and blaming each other for my muteness.

In the late fifties, School of the Air was established for remote learning and it soon had the same curriculum as any other school in the state. So that SOA students weren't disadvantaged the teachers tried to tailor each package to their individual needs. Gifted students or those with learning difficulties were especially catered for and given individual learning programs.

Helen Evans had the latest radio equipment installed and school for me became an adventure as I struggled to ‘keep up’ with Jack and pass my exams. To counteract my muteness, she encouraged me to read. This I did. and I became an avid reader travelling the world with great explorers, adventuring and fighting battles with heroes like Wellington, Nelson and

any other colourful heroic person that changed the course of history.

In the end, my mum got so fed up with me and her life on Waaree, that one morning she gave me a hug and a kiss, packed her bags and took off with a travelling rodeo rider, who happened to be passing by at the time and that was the last we ever saw of them.

With no mum around to help me, it was left to my dad, old Charlie Wright and School of the Air to fill in the gap. My dad did the best he could, but being head stockman at Waaree meant that he spent most of his time in the saddle and away from the homestead. In all that 'alone time' I developed a sign language all of my own that enabled me to 'speak' to all the aborigines on the station, who'd fall about with laughter at the antics I'd get up to, when trying to make them understand me. The only person I could really have a conversation with was Jack, but he wasn't around anymore, he'd been sent away to a boarding school in Brisbane.

With my mum gone I was more or less 'adopted' by the women in the aborigine quarters and when I wasn't doing lessons with School of the Air, I'd spend hours watching Lily – the elder of the women – painting on bits of bark. I didn't understand what all the dots that she was doing meant, and when I asked her, she told me she was of the Kalkadoon tribe and she was telling the story of the night her tribe was killed by the troopers at Battle Mountain.

It was her way of making sure that that massacre would never be forgotten.

Whenever I wasn't reading, I was with Lily, going walkabout, listening to her stories of 'dreamtime.'

"Would you like to paint?" she asked me one day.

I nodded a "yes".

Lily spoke to my father and in the next mail drop there

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was a palette, sketchbooks, pencils, brushes, paints and a pile of special watercolour paper.

After that when she was putting all those dots on her pieces of bark, she'd tell me her dreamtime stories as I struggled with sketchbook and pencil to draw what I could see around me. Lily would look at my awful drawings and tell me what was wrong, but when I blobbed colours onto them to cover up all the mistakes I'd made, she silently studied the result and didn't say anything.

For most of my childhood I tried to hide my frustration with my muteness in the fantasy world I created through reading and painting. It was the only way I could cope with being different from other kids.

Over the years, Lily said, my trees and bush-land had got better and the rivers now flowed with energy and colour.

Sometimes, in the loneliness of my quarters at night I would lie in bed and think of the painting that I had created, and for a time retreat into an idyllic world of fantasy, where I lived with both my parents in the small bull-nosed cottage that sat by the river or went fishing with my dad. Other times I would be lulled to sleep by the sound of Lily's soft calming voice telling me the dreamtime stories of the Kalkadoon tribe.

Tonight in room No 5 of the Coolabah Hotel, I fished with my dad in companionable silence from underneath the willow tree on the banks by the cottage.

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