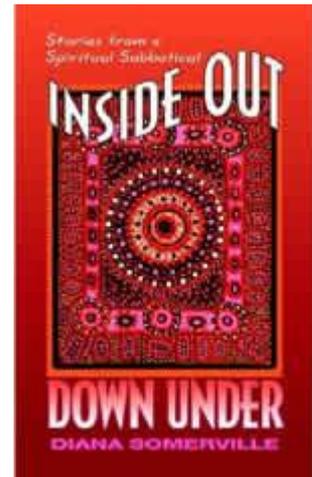


Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member
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Author Diana Somerville
Title Inside Out / Down Under:
Stories from a Spiritual Sabbatical
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Diana Somerville is a woman whom I have known for many years, but actually had not met until reading this book. Introduced electronically by a mutual friend, we have been online correspondents sharing off-beat humour and strategies to beat off what we see as political, cultural, and environmental exploitation of the world we live in.

I chose to review the book, not just because of acquaintance with Diana, but because cross-cultural, gender and spiritual encounters are what most interest me in life—and, this book is full of them. Moreover, it is fascinating to follow people who are “following their heart”

“Approaching fifty, that mid-life milestone, I overflowed with questions.” Diana begins, echoing Dante’s “dark wood on the road of life.” Undertaking a physical journey can be not only a metaphor for the spiritual journey but embody it. Whether Mecca or Compostello, California or Kerala be the destination, pilgrims over the ages have sought to fulfil vows or simply to make sense out of life “on the road” —some, like Jack Kerouac, to get over “...my feeling that everything was dead.”

Diana decided on spending a year in Australia, to go “inside out,” spiritually, by going “down under geographically.” The book is a rich mixture of her perceptions, surprises, wanderings and encounters with the culture, the personalities, the landscape of Oz, and herself.

From a literary perspective, *Inside Out/Down Under* is a joy to read. Diana is a writer by trade and her travelogue of the beauty, the challenges and the damage done to landscapes, outer and inner, geographical and spiritual are carefully and creatively crafted for maximum awareness as well as reading pleasure.

Yet to this man *Inside Out/Down Under* feels like a woman’s book, perhaps best intended for and appreciated by those in Diana’s women’s circle and like-minded and curious women on the road to self-discovery and healing. It is full of the elements of female friendship and the processes that emerge from feminist awareness and new age beliefs and rituals, seemingly substitutes for male-tainted spiritualities. There is a search for the sources of spirit in nature,

for symbols and omens, and for connecting with the “energies” of earth that are particularly abundant in the topography of the most ancient of the continents, energies amplified by the relationship of the Koori to their land and places.

It is not incidental that Native American spirituality and the Koori world get connected in this writing as tales of the white quest for lost innocence. There is Rousseauvian romanticism in the search for the unspoiled native remaining in the world and perhaps within us. Innocence unfortunately requires a great deal of judgement of the deeds and behaviours of ourselves and others, often of those most like us. It is politically incorrect to admit to the destructive social and ecological practices of native peoples. At points we see the author examining and struggling with her judgemental tendencies, recognizing them, perhaps, to some degree, accepting them in default of an exit strategy. There is a paragraph of self-reflection which begs to be quoted. The author is part of a tour group to visit the Red Centre, when she writes...

“Feeling ever so sorry for myself, I grew pissy and grouchy, longing for the everyday life I’d nicely constructed to support the notion that I was a patient, tolerant, accepting person. Living alone insulated me from the most mundane travel-induced trials like tedium, mediocre food, and, most of all, the company of people I’d never seek out. My snobbish intolerance yowled up, fed by every thoughtless comment and vapid observation—mine and others—I’d endured so far on this journey.”

Finally, painful for a man to read, there is an unmistakable undertow of rage and blame aimed at men, both in women’s lives and in the assumption that the pains of the world are male doings. Adam blamed Eve for the loss of Eden and Eve has been blaming Adam ever since, though it is still not clear who took the first bite. As in much feminist literature, there is an inability to distinguish between *patriarchy* as a social system that has exacted a price both on both men and women at the same time that both sexes have exploited it for gain, from the *masculinity* essential to men’s self-development and fulfilment.

From women, little boys hear, “You are not like your father...” and male lovers hear, “You aren’t like the rest...” While men have learned and have much to learn from women’s emancipation struggles, and can even be good allies for them, we have our own agenda for fulfilment that women may be a part of, but should not be invited to orchestrate. Yes, men are like each other and we are born to like each other, and a great deal of our spiritual quest is to transcend the wounds of separation from our fathers and our fellows that keep us from doing so. Diana’s short reflection on partners, lovers, and potentials in her life reveal expectations that will discomfit many men.

Culturally speaking, both the English language and the Anglo-Saxon lens on reality cause a substantive affinity between many Australians and USians, despite their numerous differences of slang, values, and behaviours. This affinity seems to have been a comfort for the author in a number of ways at the same time that it provided discomforts with mentalities and biases not unlike those she already knew at home. As she approaches the end of her pilgrim year abroad, Diana is anxious about the culture shock of returning home, teasing the reader who wants to know what that was like, We wonder perhaps, if it is true, that as T.S. Eliot expressed it,

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

Coming home is a different journey and perhaps another book.