

The cityscape of the Philippine capital is...one of aesthetic and material devastation...[B]y the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Asian dynamism had...bypassed the Philippines. (pp. 118–119)

For anyone who has spent time meandering through Manila's Mall of Asia or surveying the Filipino capital's bustling commercial centre, this assessment will seem unfair and jarring.

Kaplan's book is not just littered with distorted images of Asia (traffic supposedly does not stop voluntarily for pedestrians anywhere in the region aside from Singapore and Japan [p. 93]). *Asia's Cauldron* also contains naïve and offensive claims about vast swathes of the region's population. Here is Kaplan on Malaysian Muslims:

I thought the very fact that contemporary Malaysian Muslims conform to Veblen's generalizations about turn-of-the-twentieth-century Americans shows that Muslims are individuals much as everybody else, no different from us. There is no otherness to Islamic civilization, in other words. (p. 72)

Commentary of this kind is grating. Not only does it imply that it is somehow surprising that Muslims could be 'individuals much as everybody else', but it also assumes that Muslims are a homogenous mass. Kaplan's comments suggest that while he once thought that all Muslims might simply be part of an undifferentiated collective called the 'Muslim world', he is now confident that they are 'no different from us'. Categorising the world's more than 1.5 billion Muslims in such reductive terms is clearly foolhardy. As Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria, warlordism in Libya, puritanical brutality in Syria and Iraq, and theocratic authoritarianism in Iran make plain, many Muslims are manifestly very different 'from us'.

Despite its false generalisations and failure to tackle the South China Sea disputes in detail, *Asia's Cauldron* is bursting with fascinating contemporary and historical anecdotes. The prologue's examination of the centuries-old meeting of Sinic

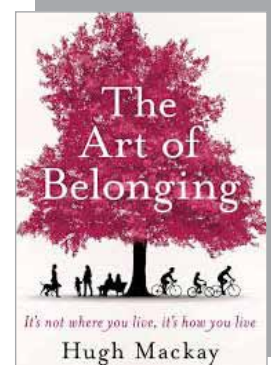
and Hindu civilisations in Indo-China provides a revealing lens through which to view the current geostrategic disputes over the South China Sea. Similarly, Kaplan's candid conversations with Filipino, Vietnamese and Taiwanese defence and foreign policy analysts are a valuable counter-point to the restrained language with which officials typically describe the South China Sea disputes. Nevertheless, Kaplan does not capitalise on these insights to flesh out the underlying forces fuelling the conflict over the South China Sea, much less recommend means by which Asian nations and the world-at-large might manage these most testy of territorial disputes.

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The Art of Belonging: It's Not Where You Live, It's How You Live

by Hugh Mackay
Pan Macmillan, 2014
\$32.99, 304 pages
ISBN 9781742614250
Reviewed by Peter Kurti



Psychologist Howard Gardner once remarked that in order to endure, a society must ensure that its values are passed on to succeeding generations. 'For if we give up lives marked by truth, beauty and goodness', he mused, 'to all intents and purposes, we resign ourselves to a world where nothing is of value'.

One of the indicators nowadays of our having lost confidence in something is when books appear telling us how to regain that confidence. It may be job insecurity that unsettles us, or the bewildering experience of raising children. Or it may be, as Gardner feared, that we have lost confidence in our capacity to instil our values in

those who come after us. Social researcher Hugh Mackay argues that community—‘what happens when humans live in close proximity to each other’—is the key to the effective nurturing and transmission of value. At the same time, many of us face challenges when it actually comes down to *belonging* to a community. Belonging is an art, he says, and like any art it requires practice.

Mackay is a distinguished chronicler of Australian society and in *The Art of Belonging* he holds up the latest of a series of social mirrors for us to peek in and check out how we are looking these days. Interspersed with his books of social analysis, over the years Mackay has also published a stream of well-received, if less widely read, novels. Here he has chosen to combine both literary forms with the creation of Southwood, a fictional Australian suburb intended to serve as a laboratory for his ideas and theories.

This is a device used to great effect by David Brooks in his book *The Social Animal*, where he developed the fictional characters of Harold and Erica to illustrate changes in human personality over time. Southwood, however, is densely populated, and Mackay’s use of the device is less successful. It can be a challenge to keep track of the characters and their interests and concerns, and whilst the characters often have interesting things to say, the voice of each is disconcertingly similar to Mackay’s.

Although he presents the book as a work of social analysis, the tone is more descriptive than analytical. Rather than persuade us, Mackay seems to want to remind us of something he thinks we may have forgotten. ‘The magical word *community* conjures up the deepest truth about us: that we are social creatures by nature. We belong in social settings. We like being around other people’.

From that starting point Mackay launches into a broad and wide-ranging survey of how we

confront that ‘deepest truth’ in our 21st century lives. Eating together, living together, living alone, meeting online, and tending relationships when the bonds of community are strained—these are all aspects of learning how to belong that Mackay examines closely through the prism of Southwood.

Mackay says that an essential requirement for living in community is the capacity to strike an effective balance between competition and cooperation, ‘because we are not at our best when we retreat into the self-serving, arrogant (sometimes narcissistic) position of the outsider’. Through this process of learning to balance conflicting urges, notions of virtue and morality are both discovered and expressed. Community then becomes the context in which truth is tested and social identity experienced.

How good are we at this testing and experiencing? Mackay is too experienced a social researcher to push his own point of view to the fore, yet one gets the sense that he is troubled. He reports that two of the most common complaints about ‘decline’ in Western societies are that communities are not functioning as well as they once did, and that morality has become more elastic—two complaints that may be related, if his theory of community is correct. Mackay doesn’t offer any suggestion about what we need to do about any of this. His style is always descriptive, seldom prescriptive. He simply reminds us of the important truth that “cohesive communities produce coherent moral systems”. After that, it’s up to you to decide how to make sense of your life.

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